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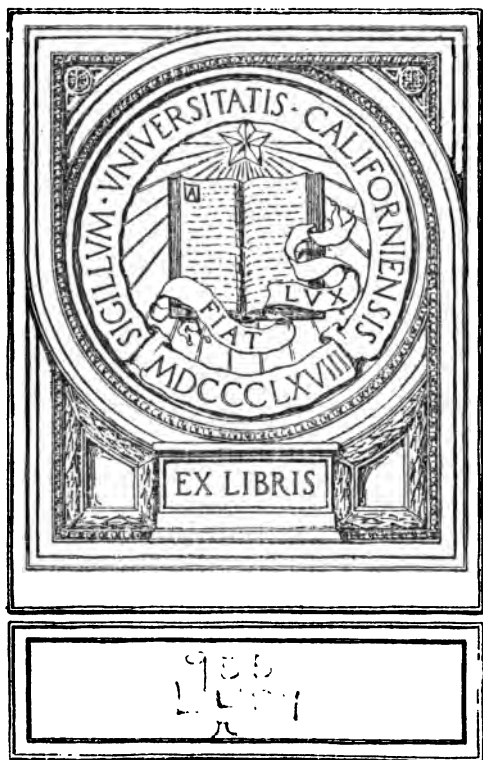
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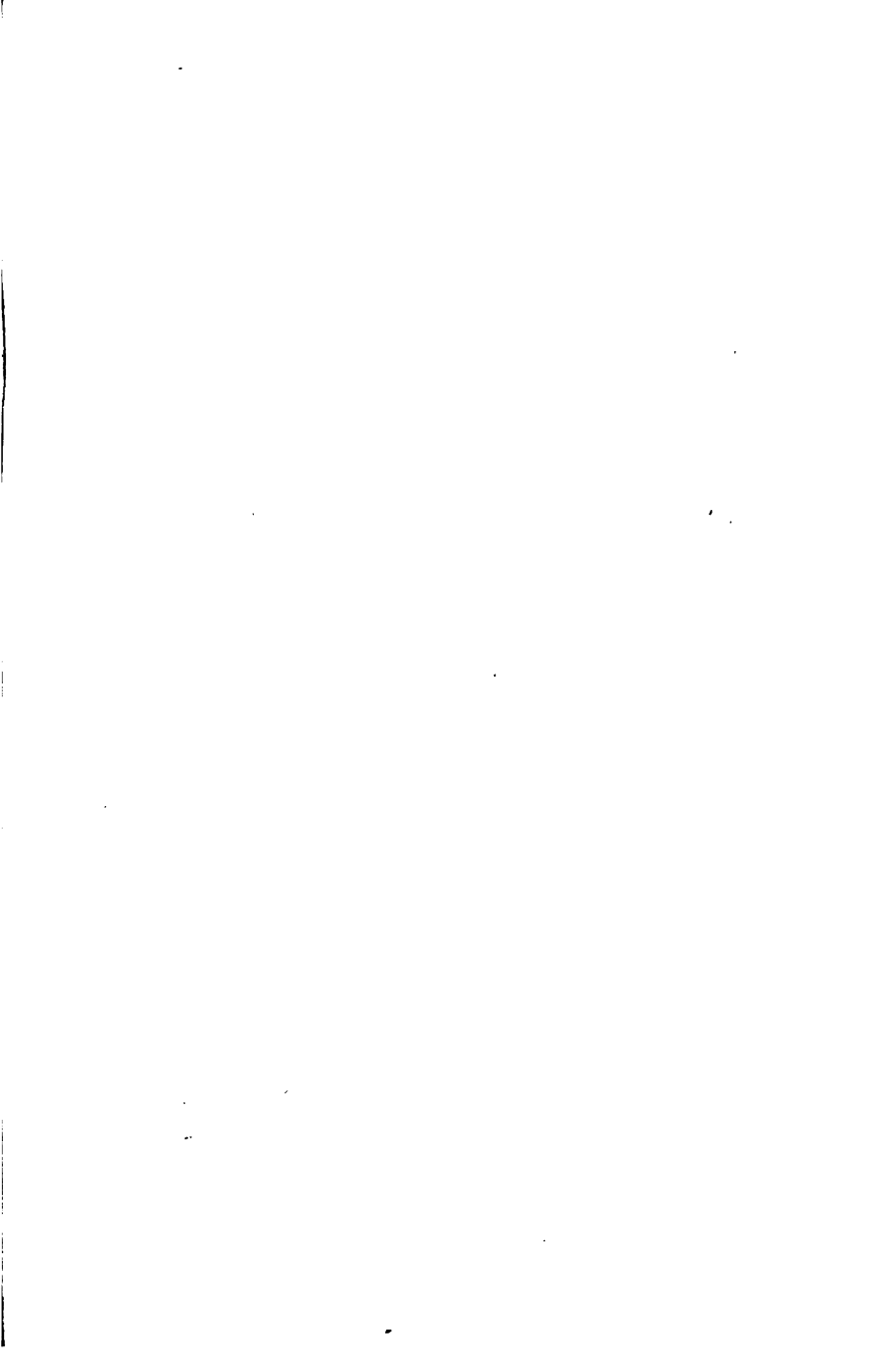
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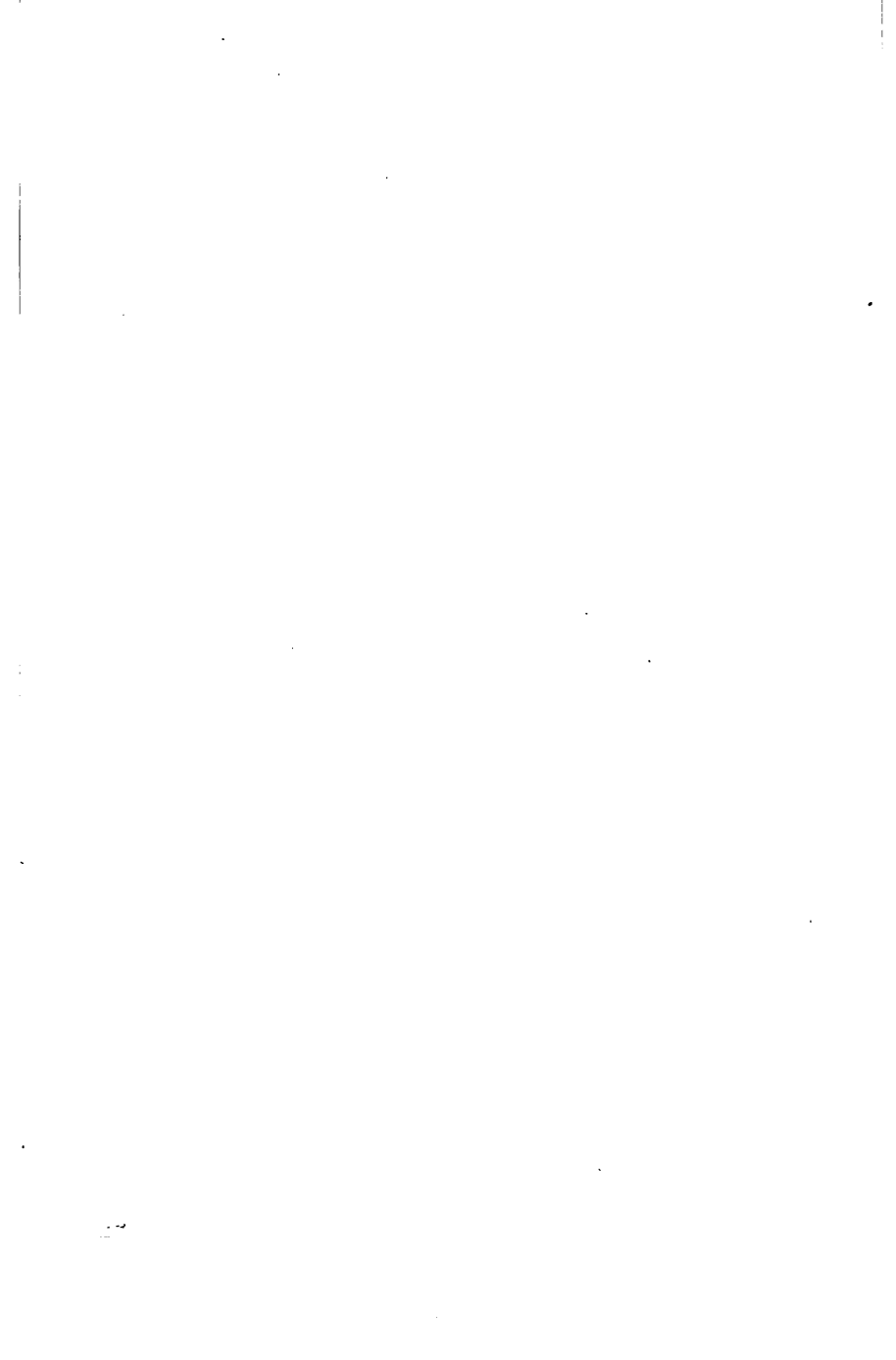
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**THE ROMANCE OF THE  
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# THE ROMANCE OF THE FOUNTAIN

BY  
EUGENE LEE-HAMILTON

AUTHOR OF "SONNETS OF THE WINGLESS HOURS"  
"THE LORD OF THE DARK RED STAR," ETC. ETC.



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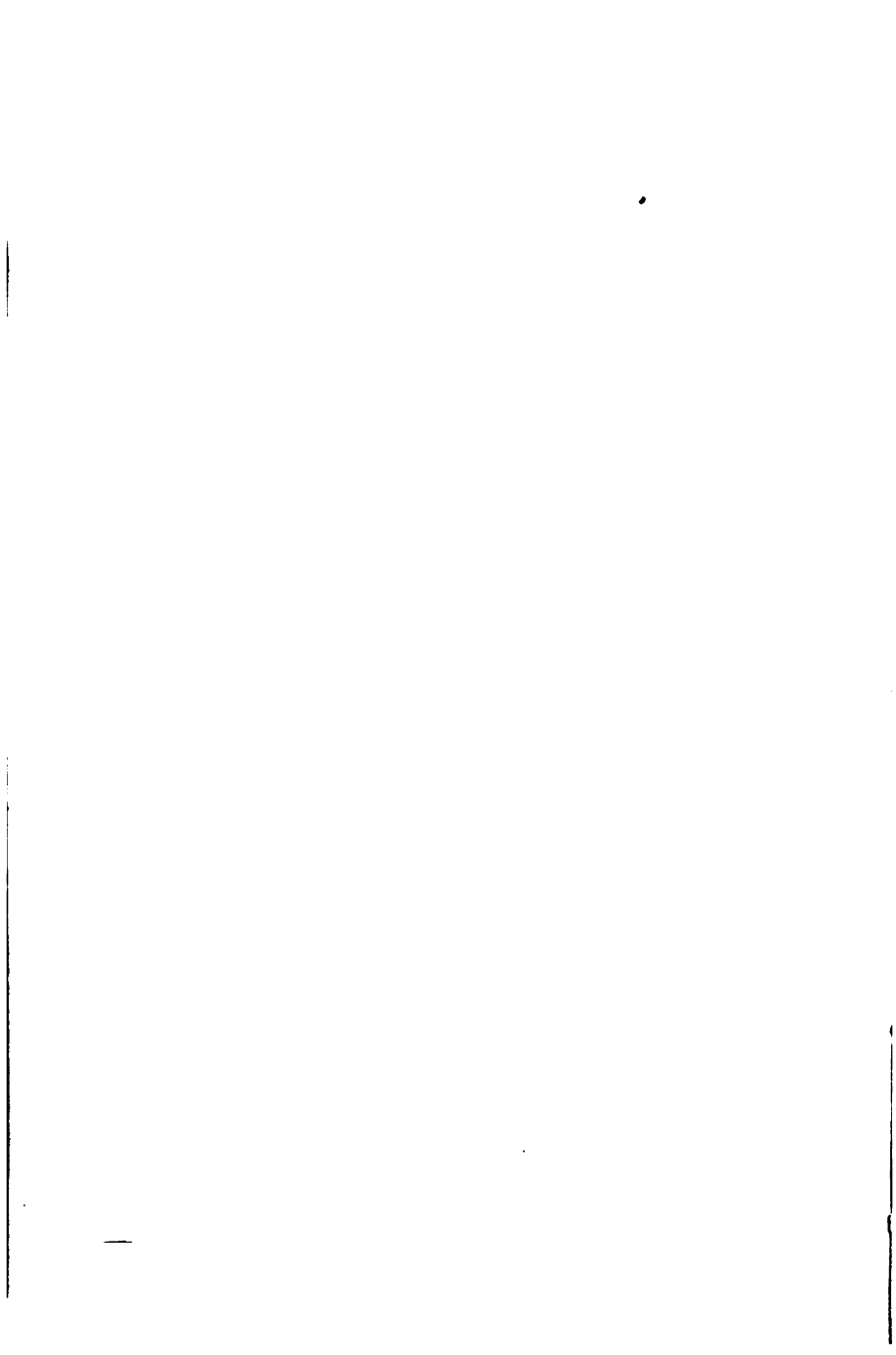
TO THE  
AMERICAN

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK  
TO ALL, WHETHER YOUNG OR OLD, WHO FEEL THE  
SPELL OF THE MOST ROMANTIC EPISODE OF THE  
WORLD'S MOST ROMANTIC MOMENT;  
WHEN MEN, IN PURSUIT OF THE UNREAL,  
CONQUERED FOR OUR LATER AGES  
EVER-REAL TREASURES  
OF FANCY.

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## CONTENTS

Chap.	Page
I. GATHERING OF CLUES . . . . .	1
II. INDIAN BEADS . . . . .	22
III. HEREDITARY FOES . . . . .	36
IV. PREPARATIONS . . . . .	45
V. A ROYAL AUDIENCE . . . . .	53
VI. THE START . . . . .	67
VII. IN HISPANIOLA . . . . .	74
VIII. BECALMED . . . . .	84
IX. MOON-SHADOWS . . . . .	91
X. SHIP'S TALK . . . . .	99
XI. THE WATER IN THE TANKS . . . . .	108
XII. THE FLOWER . . . . .	120
XIII. THE LANDING OF THE WHITES . . . . .	125
XIV. SUSPENSE . . . . .	132
XV. THE MEN IN THE BOATS . . . . .	139
XVI. RENDEZVOUS IN THE FOREST . . . . .	144
XVII. MEETING OF FOES . . . . .	156
XVIII. THE WOLF IN THE FLEECE . . . . .	166

# Contents

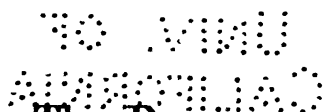
Chap.	Page
XIX. THE PORTENT . . . . .	174
XX. IN THE SPANISH CAMP . . . . .	188
XXI. SILENT PERIL . . . . .	203
XXII. THE AMBASSADORS . . . . .	208
XXIII. MAGIC . . . . .	222
XXIV. THE FIGHT ROUND THE LITTER . . . . .	234
XXV. IN THE ROCK TEMPLE . . . . .	241
XXVI. THE DUNGEON . . . . .	248
XXVII. BY THE MAGIC BRINK . . . . .	262

# THE ROMANCE OF THE FOUNTAIN

## CHAPTER I

### GATHERING OF CLUES

NEARLY a generation had elapsed since the adventurous spirits of Spain had begun their wild chase of the setting sun. They might indeed almost be said to have caught up the great round orb in Hispaniola. And yet but a very small part of those phantom islands which for centuries had loomed in the golden light of the western horizon only to vanish in mist and night, had so far been added to the Spanish possessions. No one yet suspected the existence of the treasuries of gold that were about to be opened up by Cortes and Pizarro. But still a vague wistful wonder was turning all men's eyes to the West. It was the time



## The Romance of the Fountain

when every hungry scholar, shivering in his tattered cloak in the shadow of some Spanish University, might be thinking of selling his books to buy himself a sword; and when the beggar in the square might be dreaming of printing his bare feet in sands of gold; nay, might perhaps be potentially the lord of yet undiscovered realms.

But gold and precious stones, dominion and slaves, were not the only things that men panted for as they looked wistfully westwards, and followed the setting sun on its way. There were other and less material prizes, stranger and more dazzling goals, in the unknown lands of the Evening, that appealed to the wild imagination of men, to the eternal thirst of the spirit.

In an old turreted manor-house of Andalusia, among the astrological instruments and alchemistic crucibles which filled his study, a dreamy-looking man, somewhat past middle-age, and wearing a dark acid-stained dressing-gown had just ceased his monotonous walk

## Gathering of Clues

up and down, and stood at the open casement, looking in such wistful surmise at the sun as it rolled towards the West. For there, where that sun would be when night would be lying thickly and heavily here upon Spain, something told him that what he sought for from year to year with ever wilder desire perhaps lay hid.

Only when the sun had dipped and disappeared below the horizon, did he brush back the grizzling hair from his forehead, close the window and resume his walk up and down, reviewing the life that lay behind him. Had twenty years of effort to distil the Great Elixir only served to bring him to the brink of age, to strew the first thin snows upon his forehead, and leave him in the grasp of despair? Had he not toiled in his solitary workshop by Saturn's cold blear eye, and then as vainly under the blood-red eye of Mars? Had he not tried, at the peril of his life, to concoct it with the venom of the asp, to make it with the spittle of the rabid wolf, or with

## The Romance of the Fountain

the mingled juices of plants so deadly, that had it not been for the protection of his thin glass mask, the pestiferous fumes would then and there have turned his red blood black, and thickened it into treacle? "O Youth, Youth," he cried, "what sacrifices have I left unoffered to make thee mine for ever?" And must he now, in spite of all, behold his strong right hand shake with the palsy, his strong firm foot, which could still climb the steepest hill-side grow vague and shuffling, his smooth skin become a creasy vellum on which the years would have written their miserable cares? Must this keen eye, still as piercing as the hawk's, become a cloudy lens, through which the shapes which he saw so distinct, would be as pale as the dim memories that would pass like ghosts across his frozen heart? O rosy Youth, wearer of the swift sandals of the Dawn, such could not be the end of the fiercest of thy votaries!

He stopped in his walk, and a lighting smile dissipated the frown that had darkened his face.



## Gathering of Clues

Ah, but the Great Elixir was not the only means of stemming age. Was there not also that ineffable Fountain, that bubbling, rippling Diamond of which men had drunk in magic dreams, one draught of which could make the mask of wrinkles drop off for ever? And had any man a doubt that it existed on one spot or other of the world?

But whither turn our steps? The two or three who had reached it in the course of centuries, had locked the glorious secret in their bosom, or had left only dark and closely-guarded hints respecting its whereabouts.

And yet there was one who spoke very clearly—the great Astralphus. He would take down the book and re-read the passage.

It was a huge parchment-bound folio with metal clasps. He laid it on the high reading-desk near the window, and by the slowly-fading after-glow of the sunset, followed the crabbed Gothic letters with his finger, line by line.

“The Fountain stands in the middle of the Wood of Ancients,” he read, muttering the

## The Romance of the Fountain

words as he went on, "a pale and very perilous enchanted forest, all of gnarled and leafless trees, grey wrinkled trunks, which once were men and women. In it are gathered all those within whose hearts the spark of Youth died out wholly before they died themselves. Their feet are twisted roots. Their bony fingers are warped and knotted twigs. Their frozen tears are now dry glassy gums in crooked trickles; while their beard and hair are grey tufted mosses, floating and fluttering in the wind, which tries to awake them with vague prophecies. And if you place your ear against one of the trunks, you can hear the faint monotonous ticking heart within, which never quickens, never slackens. The gnarled old trees utter no sound, unless you prick the trunk with the point of your sword; and then they give a faint dull moan. The forest is wrapped in eternal twilight."

The reader stopped.

"Can anything be more precise?" he asked, as if appealing to some invisible companion.

## Gathering of Clues

"He writes like one who has surely been there. And here again, where he describes the dangers of the journey:"—And once more his forefinger followed the crabbed Gothic lines.

"The Wood of Ancients is beset with a thousand perils; and is full of dreadful enchantments. They say that should he who has to cross it cease to look ahead; or should he let cold and numbness grasp him in a lethargy; or should he stop, if only for an instant, doubting of Youth and of his goal, his feet at once take root, his stiffened arms turn into branches, and mighty creepers twine at once round his body and bind him down for ever."

"A monstrous fate," he muttered, shaking his head; "but one which I would risk in very blitheness, if only I had the chance. It is not I who would doubt of Youth. Now let us see how the old wizard monk describes the water."

"The Fountain itself, when once the Wood has been crossed, gleams in an opal basin in the centre of a great labyrinth, bathed in

## The Romance of the Fountain

floods of sunshine, and guarded eternally by seven dragons, armoured in scales of solid natural gold, with ruby-studded wings and claws of steel. At night the garden, which is lit by luminous flowers, is filled with innumerable butterflies of fire. The leaves, which are of thin sheet emerald, never fall from year to year. The fruits are of red eatable gold, with pips and kernels of precious stones."

He slowly closed the volume, and fastened down the clamps.

"A tantalising picture," he sighed. "But Astralphus, why torture thus our hopes and our dreams, and then withhold the clue? Oh, thou art cruel. And thy silence would crush me, if I did not remember that Michael of Ravenna and the Dutchman, as well as Paul of Trebizond, in their commentaries on this very passage, identify thy Garden with that of the Hesperides. If so, the Fountain lies evening-wards and to the West. What if it lay in that new world of islands discovered

## Gathering of Clues

by Columbus? There no search has yet been made. It is a strange thought. Is it a revelation? Oh fool, fool! Had I not wasted twenty years in seeking the Great Elixir; had I not grown grey in groping along the interminable galleries of Error, but, instead, sought the glorious Fount of Youth, I might this very day be kneeling beside its dazzling mirror, and be casting a last long look on my whitening hair, about to plunge in its laughing waves of joy; about to stand transformed in godlike strength and beauty, bathing in Youth. . . ."

At this point, voices at the door interrupted his meditations, and recalled him to more immediate matters. He remembered that he had appointed the hour after sunset for an interview with three representatives of the three Oriental races still tolerated in Spain, with the idea of consulting them on any traditions which their ancient peoples might possess on the subject that engrossed his thoughts.

"Let them come in," he said to the servant

## The Romance of the Fountain

who, bearing a three-branched silver candlestick, lighted the visitors into the now fast-darkening room. They were three typical specimens of their respective races—an aged Rabbi, a Moor, and a Gipsy. A very evident terror was in their faces, and they huddled close to each other as they approached, cringing and bowing.

“The magnificent Lord, Don Luis de Medrana, hath sent for us . . .” began Ezdrel, the Jew, uneasily, and acting as spokesman. “We throw ourselves at the feet of his Magnificence. . . .”

The man so addressed made a reassuring gesture of something like welcome, or at least of protection, more cordial than his visitors were probably accustomed to on the part of a Christian and a person of quality.

“Approach,” he said, “and fear not. I perceive suspicion darting in your eyes; but you have nothing to fear. If I have summoned you beneath my roof, you need not tremble. It is not to extort either apostasy or treasure,

## Gathering of Clues

but simply for counsel. Dissimilar and hostile as our races are, unlike as we may be in hue and in feature, in thought and in act, in habits and in creed, we have still two things in common—youth and age. The same relentless winter strews cruel frost upon our heads. The same invisible load bends down our backs. The same inexorable law is written year by year upon our brows in ineffaceable wrinkles. We pant with the same unslakable thirst for one same draught of rejuvenescence. I therefore pray you, if all or any of you should chance to possess, in the traditions belonging to your peoples, a knowledge of the dazzling waters known as the Fount of Youth—one drop of which would for ever make us young—to impart such knowledge to me now.”

A murmur of surprise and reassurance answered Don Luis's words. His visitors looked first at each other, then at him.

“Speak first, O Jew,” he said.

The Rabbi stepped forward with another deep inclination.

## The Romance of the Fountain

"My hoary head and beard, most magnificent Sir," he began, "bear cruel witness to the fact that my steps have never approached the Fount you speak of. And my race, which bears three thousand years of wrinkles on its brow, and on whose bent back the cudgels of the world still fall from age to age, might say the same. Many are the waters by which we have sat and wept. Whether or not we shall ever sit down beside that magic spring, I know not, nor can I tell you whither to turn your footsteps to reach its brink. But I can tell you the strange thing which befell our great King Solomon when he yearned towards it. For it is written in the Book of Jashel for all to read."

"Ha, did Solomon seek the Fount?" cried Don Luis. "I did not know. Tell all thou knowest, Rabbi; and mind thou leave out nothing."

"He was the mightiest King," the Jew proceeded, "between the uttermost corners of the world. All that the breadth and the



## Gathering of Clues

bowels of earth, all that the depth and the surface of the sea could yield, was his. The Genii who obeyed the circles of his royal wizard wand, built for him harems of sandalwood and gold, with doors of ivory and courts of trellised silver. Countless caravans brought to his gates an endless stream of spikenard and myrrh, the gold of Ophir, the Tyrian purple, the leopard-skins, the peacocks and the pearls of captive peoples. Every warlike tribe famous for its slave-girls, sent him its whitest tribute. And glory he had, and boundless subtle wisdom. But one great gift, one never-replenished treasure, was dwindling day by day. His youth was waning, his beard was whitening, and cold and dearth were settling upon his heart.

“He summoned a great assembly of the Genii. They flocked from the East and the North, from the West and the South, darkening the sky as they flew. But none of them could give him youth.

“Then Solomon bethought him of a fountain

## The Romance of the Fountain

he had heard of long ago, whose waters made men young, and belonging to the queen of seven islands that lay beyond the Pillars of Eternal Storm; and he resolved to send a ship to crave a single gourdful. And he filled the ship with the costliest presents; with enormous rubies; with gem-embroidered carpets; with massive sceptres; with ostrich eggs in golden settings; with dwarf gazelles whose horns and hoofs were studded with jewels; with frankincense in chiselled vases of jasper; with pictured targets of hammered gold. And fearing, in the corners of his prudence, lest any aged mariner should steal the priceless draught of rejuvenescence, he chose a crew of strong adventurous youths with life before them. They were to sail for forty days and forty nights; and with his eyes fixed upon his whitening beard, and counting the days, Solomon awaited their return.

“Six months went by, and still nothing was to be seen of the ship. But at last, at last, it loomed upon the far horizon, and

## Gathering of Clues

old and young crowded upon the shore to meet it. But with a wonder that struck all dumb, it was found to contain a crew of wrinkled, tottering, white-haired men, toothless, blear of eye, and curved of spine, whose palsied arms scarcely succeeded in pulling the ropes. They were the self-same men who, but half a year before, had left exulting in their beauty and in their strength. They brought no draught of youth; nay, not one single drop; but gibbered in their dotage—all save one, less crazy than the rest, who, before he died, imparted to Solomon alone a tale of mad and unwhisperable horror, which the great king locked in his bosom, safe from the children of men."

"I thank thee, Jew," said Don Luis, as the Rabbi ended his story. "Thy spirit-crazing narrative would have thrown back my soul like a steed upon its haunches, were it not for one thing. Thou said'st that thy seven islands lay beyond the Pillars of Eternal Storm. Those, I opine, can be none other

## The Romance of the Fountain

than the Pillars of Hercules. And so thou, too, confirming my every clue, dost send me to the West." Then turning to Aben Hamet, the Moor, he begged him, if there lurked in the ancient vellums of his nation, or among its dreams and stories, anything bearing upon what he sought, to let him have such knowledge.

"Many a book," answered the Moslem, "has been composed, most lofty Sir, to lighten the sleeplessness of caliphs; and the wonders therein contained are not less in number than the stars and circling orbs of heaven. For, as the Poet saith excellently well: 'The Ocean of the Wondrous hath no shores; and he who sails thereon may sail for ever.' Yet one most marvellous, one most thrilling volume, eclipses all those ever written; and he who hath not read the Yellow Book of Hassan of Aleppo, knoweth not the meaning of wonder. In all that deals with magic, with dreams, enchantments, philtres, transformations, afreets, ghouls, demons, and the world of genii, there is no authority on earth that can approach it.

## Gathering of Clues

Know therefore, most lofty Sir, that the ever-dazzling Fount, whose magic waves can wash off human wrinkles, must be sought in the Valley of the Seven Moons."

"And where lies that?" asked the Seeker of Youth.

"Behind the Setting Sun. A thousand leagues to the westward of the West."

"Ha, west of west," exclaimed the other. "How all confirms my thought! But tell me more of thy magic valley."

"A ring of black and cloud-capped basaltic peaks," said Aben Hamet, "encloses it with eternal rock and chasm, so dreadful and so dizzy, that no wingless creature has ever reached even its lowest ridges, and the birds themselves, scared by the lifeless horror, fly no higher than its middle ledges. Only the shadowy Genii, now and then, soar through the mists on their demon wings and sit on some livid shelf of rock over the intolerable abyss, to rest their load of curse. There is not one gap, however narrow, in the monstrous

## The Romance of the Fountain

rampart; and he who would enter the valley must pass along subterranean paths through Nature's very entrails, and interminable caverns filled with ghosts and snakes. In the darkness the snakes wind round the adventurer's feet, or let themselves down from the unseen vault, and grasp him by the throat. And if he is not quick in disentangling his pinioned limbs they will keep him there for ever. The caverns of the ghosts are further on, and less dark. The phantoms start out of the rock, and whisper into his ear secrets so horrible, that few do not go mad as they hear them. And here and there on the ground lies a shapeless shape which might be human. These are the previous adventurers who perished and were petrified by the drippings from the vault above. Then midway along the chain of caverns is the Lake of Tidal Fire, which he who seeks for Youth must cross on a slippery reef of rocks, uncovered only when the fiery tarn is at low ebb. It is a doubtful race between the adventurer and the molten lava,

## Gathering of Clues

which creeps higher and higher in silent fiery waves, lighting up the whole huge cavern with a lurid glare, splendid and terrific. Further on there are many other caverns, each one full of some new crazing horror, and described with the minutest detail in the book of Hassan of Aleppo, but whose names I have forgotten, save two—the cavern called the gallery of the Ever-Dropping Stones, where lumps of rock keep dropping down from the roof to crush the wretch who runs in the dark; and one that has deep, deep pools all full of sharks who, from the eternal darkness, have lost their eyes, and whom he has to elude as he swims. The last of the caverns opens out into the Valley of Eternal Moonlight. Its seven moons, eternally at the full, cast a sevenfold shadow, and display the Fountain that leapeth for ever towards them in a tank of pearl as if with vain incessant longing, and falleth back in folds of luminous spray into the pearly basin, like the tail of Omar's battle steed."

## The Romance of the Fountain

"The caverns thou rememberest are sufficiently terrible, even without those thou hast forgotten," remarked Don Luis. "But does thy Hassan not tell us where to find their entrance?"

"Ay, he doth, with the utmost precision," answered the Moor gravely.

"Well?"

"Many years have passed since I read it, and the details have become blurred beyond recovery on the tablets of my mind. Hassan's Yellow Book was kept in the Alhambra, and the Christians destroyed it with a thousand other marvels when they took Granada."

"May the curse of Heaven consume them!" cried Don Luis, unable to control his vexation.

"What, do you curse your own?" asked Aben Hamet.

"Nay, nay," he answered, "I meant the Moslem, for not having placed it elsewhere. And so thou leavest me no wiser than has the Jew. And now let us hear the Gipsy. Why, the fellow's gone!"



## Gathering of Clues

And so indeed it seemed.

"He was in the room a minute ago," said the Rabbi, "and drinking in the Moor's description as if it had been the Water of Youth itself."

"And by the Lord," cried the Seeker, "the rascal has taken my gold chain! . . ."

"I miss the jewelled buckle of my girdle," cried Aben Hamet.

"Oh, my shekels," cried in his turn the Rabbi. "I had six doubloons in my purse. . . . Oh my sweet little doubloons! He has taken my little doubloons! . . ."

Then, as the three looked at each other in consternation, a voice was heard singing in the garden below :

"Where the gipsy tinker tinkles  
On a kettle all of gold,  
Is the Fount that takes the wrinkles  
From the forehead of the old."

They ran to the window, but there was no one to be seen.

## CHAPTER II

### INDIAN BEADS

WHILE Don Luis de Medrana was thus engaged by day and by night in his lonely study in an unremitting search for the great abstraction Youth, concrete youth itself might have been seen at its rosiest in a room on the opposite side of the house, in the shape of his own daughter Rosita.

Her maid Cristina had just entered to wake her and to open her window in the early morning; and the girl, still half asleep, was stretching her arms, as she worked her way out of her interrupted dreams. A smile that had begun in her sleep was still on her lips.

"Hark," she said. "What's that? The sound has been blending with a dream I have just had. What is it?"

## Indian Beads

"Do you find it so difficult to guess?" said the maid, with a little laugh.

Rosita's smile expanded into a little laugh too.

"Perhaps I know," she said, "in the narrow corner where we keep sweet thoughts."

"Listen," said Cristina, "the tinkling has begun again. In a moment he'll repeat the song. There, it begins."

"Open the lattice," said her mistress, "that I may catch the words."

It was a man's voice, kept down as if from prudence. Its strength and beauty were guessed, rather than actually heard; and the words, though low, were singularly distinct.

"Awake! The steeds of Phœbus  
Are pawing, maned with light,  
Behind the cloudy fences  
That part the Day and Night.

"And Phœbus' self is leaping,  
Flame-sandal'd, on his car,  
To whirl the dust behind him  
Of every scattered star.

# The Romance of the Fountain

"So leaps my love towards thee  
At every break of day,  
To make thee mine for ever  
And whirl thy soul away.

"See, see how Heaven's coursers  
Have sprung with meteor hoofs  
Upon the sleeping cornfields  
And dreamy cottage roofs.

"The cloudy heights are conquered,  
The stars are put to rout ;  
Awake, awake, Rosita,  
The night is trampled out."

The voice ceased ; but the thrumming of the guitar was still heard.

"Give me the yellow briar-rose from the vase, that I may throw it," said Rosita.

The maid took it from the table.

"In my native province," she said, as she handed it to her mistress, "we have a saying that when a woman who bears a flower's name, throws a man that flower from a window, she throws her own self with it."

Rosita jumped out of bed, stole to the window

## Indian Beads

on tiptoe, peeped, and threw the rose down through the lattice.

"He has caught it," she cried in a whisper. "If souls can nestle in the petals of a flower," she whispered yet lower to herself, "mine has been thrown in that one, and he has it."

"Your birthday, madam, opens well," said Cristina.

"My birthday? Ah, so it is. But indeed, indeed, I wish it were not. My heart is too heavy for a birthday."

"What, in spite of the singer and his song?"

"Alas, on account of the singer and his song," said Rosita. "Isn't Juan de Alvareda the son of our bitterest enemy, of one whose name few care even to whisper in my father's presence? What hope is there of ever getting his consent? If he were caught. . . ."

"Your father is too busy with his own schemes to interfere with yours," answered the maid.

"My father's schemes?" said Rosita. "Ay,

## The Romance of the Fountain

that is what is casting the ugly cloud and darkening my birthday. He has some project in his mind that bodes us little good; and every day he drops some hint that fills my heart with alarm. He has now adventurers and seekers from the Indies constantly about him. I loathe the sight of them. One above all—that man Diego Perez—seems to throw an evil shadow on the sunny path; why, I scarcely know. . . . Perhaps it is the way he stares at me whenever we meet.”

“I like the man as little as you do,” returned Cristina; “or any other of those westward-sailing knaves. Which dress will you put on for your birthday, the silver cloth with the seed-pearl stomacher, or the puce with the gold pomegranates?” And opening a wardrobe, she held up the dresses in question.

“I don’t care which,” Rosita answered. “It matters little in what silk or satin I clothe my apprehensions. For myself, I would best like my plain frock of every day. . . . But hark!

## Indian Beads

what noise is that? What women are talking under the window? Go and see."

Cristina went to the window.

"It's a chorus of reapers, Madam," she said, looking back into the room. "A band of women and girls from the village. They are bringing a wreath of cornflowers for your birthday. It's as large as a cart wheel, with blue and red streamers. . . ."

"Go down and give them largess," said her mistress.

As Cristina left the room the song of the women rose up simple and sweet. Rosita felt her heart tighten, why she knew not. Was it because he and she had first met in the ruddy ripeness of the corn, that day of days? Would she were one of them, she thought, and he a peasant, that she might go and bathe at sunset in the sea of golden grain, free and without fear, waiting for the great slow wave that evening sets in motion through the wheat—the signal of his coming. Oh, how sweet would be the safety of a cottage hearth, how-

## The Romance of the Fountain

ever humble, for the years that had to come, instead of this vague future and its terror! How sweet to meet in an open, fearless love, and not, as now, with danger and with intrigue, when every meeting was perhaps but a parting—a parting, and for ever! Her brow would be less white than it was; the blue veins would be tanned away on her sunburnt arm; but Juan and the future would both be hers.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a slow and measured step creaking along the gallery outside. She knew it to be her father's.

He had on the long brownish dressing-gown that he was wont to wear in his alchemist's study. His peaked beard was streaked with grey. His eyes had the rather vacant and distant look of the habitual dreamer and mystic. But, as they rested on his daughter, they seemed to return to earth, and they shone with a kindly light.

“Didst thou think that to-day of all days I would omit to kiss this sweet young face of



## Indian Beads

thine?" he said, as she held it up to him. "It is the fairest thing thy father's eyes can rest on, till they rest on the radiant brow of Youth that has no end."

He brought out a small leather case.

"See here, Rosita," he said as he opened it. "I bring thee something dainty for thy birthday—a necklace of unfamiliar beads made by the Indians in far Hispaniola, each bead unlike the others."

But her face fell.

"What, not pleased? I thought the gift would have made thee dance for joy."

"I wish it came from any other place," she said.

"Thou art a silly, wayward child," he answered, with a slight frown. "But I can afford to miss thy thanks for this small gewgaw of Indian cunning. Do I not hold in reserve the gift of gifts—the dazzling, potent, ineffable drops, that shall preserve for ever the sparkle of thine eye, the dimple of thy cheek? What the daughters of magnificent kings have

## The Romance of the Fountain

yearned for in vain, shall it not be thine, thine and for ever?"

Again his eyes grew vague and mystic, and seemed to be looking at the far distance.

"The unconscious child," he murmured to himself; "I see an omen in her very beauty. If God has given her such eyes, and features of such rare perfection, is it not because they are marked out by Heaven to last and never know decay; because she will be dowered with the glory of sharing my first draught?"

But Rosita shook her head.

"I have no wish for eternal youth, for endless beauty," she said. "My mother did without it, and why not I? I wish to share the common lot of humanity. I wish to be, when the natural time comes, a little silver-headed great-grandmother, all shrunk and bent, with little twinkling eyes, who will sit and spin by the blazing hearth, telling the children fairy-tales all day."

"A hideous blasphemy, a most monstrous vision," said Don Luis, with a little shiver;

## Indian Beads

"a vile, unnatural wish! But, thank God thy youth shall be preserved on thy cheek in all its rosiness and all its sweet charm despite thyself. And now listen. I brought thee this rare necklace of Indian beads that it might coax thee to greet with pleasure a piece of news that will perhaps rather startle thee. I have resolved to take thee to the new Indies of the West."

Rosita turned very pale.

"Merciful Virgin!" she cried; "so my fears were but too well founded."

"I have resolved to mortgage this place, both lands and house," her father went on, "and stake my fortune on a venturous sail beyond Hispaniola."

"Mortgage these walls! These broad fertile lands! Why, your very fathers, lying dead in their graves, will shudder and turn round!"

A smile of contempt flitted over the dreamy face of the mystic.

"Poor buried fools," he said. "If only they had had the wit to do as I am doing, they

## The Romance of the Fountain

would not to-day be dead and mouldering bones, but living men, quick with the breath of youth."

"Pledge these inherited acres," cried the girl again; "hand them over to the stranger; leave everything that is most familiar and most dear! You cannot mean it, father; nor can I believe it. Can you look on our ancestors' portraits on the wall, and mention such a project before their faces?"

"Poor ghosts of paint and canvas," he answered, looking up where she pointed, with a not unfriendly pity; "poor ghosts of paint and canvas! Had they not, in their piteous dulness, rooted their lives like trees to their inherited clods, but sought the Fountain like me, their descendant, they would now be flesh and blood. It isn't they who shall stop me in my life's great scheme, just as the sunrise of Success is unfolding. And now no more discussion. I forbid it."

But at this point a sound of voices again rose up through the open window. Her

## Indian Beads

father's expression changed to one of disgust and loathing.

"What are those cracked voices?" he cried, putting his hands to his ears. "What hideous and loathsome song of crazed decrepitude? Quick, shut the window. It makes me sick. Those creaky cacklings are more than I can bear."

"It is the village elders, who have come for my birthday," said his daughter, as he hurried from the room. "They have come to wish me joy. They do so every year."

It was, as she said, the peasants who had grown old and decrepit in the protection of the family; those who, standing on the edge of the grave, could look back on the fields they had tilled, on the fields that had heaped up their garners through life. The earth had given them of her best, had filled the casks with the vintage, the hods with the olives. Now she asked them for their bones in return, and why should they grudge them? The bird must drop that another may sing upon

## The Romance of the Fountain

the bough; the beast must die that another may feed upon what it fed. And now they came to wish long life and joy to one whose feet were still wet with the dew of her dawn-time, and brought her the tribute of an old age that was willing to die.

"Come, dry your tears," said Cristina, as she brought in the wreaths of the women and the elders; "your father's mind may change."

"Thou knowest him little," answered Rosita, "if thou thinkest he will turn upon his steps. One drop of what he sails for to the Indies is dearer to his heart than my life. I felt it coming."

"Let me see the necklace of Indian beads," said Cristina.

"Yes, take it from my neck," answered her mistress. "Were every bead that runs beneath my finger a pill of poison, and full of deadly peril, it could not be more ominous of misfortune."

"Do you believe in the Fount of Youth, Madam?"

## Indian Beads

"I don't know whether the Fount of Youth exists," the girl said sadly; "but well I know of one that does—the Fount of Sorrow. And all who depend upon my father's pleasure, will, sooner or later, have to drink of that."

## CHAPTER III

### HEREDITARY FOES

THE Alvaredas were the nearest neighbours of the Medranas—the nearest, the most hated. Ever since the day when, generations ago, a Medrana had thundered off with the wife of an Alvareda on his saddle-bow, and had defended his prize for years in his battlemented castle against the united chiefs of the outraged family, every Medrana had been reared in the belief that the sweetest blood in the world was that of an Alvareda, and every Alvareda had trained his children to thirst for the blood of a Medrana. Yet in the course of years the hereditary feud might have yielded to the influence of the somewhat gentler manners that the new centuries were bringing with them, and of the courtly habits that were



## Hereditary Foes

slowly replacing the mailed and helmeted life of the past, if the old hatred had not been suddenly and gratuitously revived some years previously to the opening of this story, by the action of the present owner of the Castle of Alvareda, who, on the wedding day of the present Medrana, had forced his horse into the church during the ceremony, clattered up to the altar, laid his hand on the bride as she stood there, and almost succeeded in renewing the feat of his ancestor's enemy. The days of private war were over; and the insult was wiped out in a duel in which Don Luis, the victim of the outrage, was so seriously wounded that his life was for a moment despaired of. After that, the Lord of Alvareda had contented himself with seizing every opportunity that chance offered to injure his enemy at court and in private, till the latter, after the death of his wife, which occurred when Rosita was five, detaching himself more and more from the world, had locked himself up in his study, and given himself wholly to alchemistic research,

## The Romance of the Fountain

alone in his old turreted home with his motherless daughter.

Meanwhile, Juan, the younger son of Alvareda, as soon as the first down had appeared on his chin, had looked round him for military employ. It was an unfortunate moment. The centuries of Moorish warfare had been brought to a close. The kingdom of Granada, with the possibilities of knightly prowess and romantic single combat that its last flare of resistance and dying struggle still afforded, was no more. The brilliant Italian campaigns of Consalvo de Cordova were over as well; and the dream-transcending achievements of Cortes and Pizarro had yet to astonish mankind. In the Indies of Columbus, in Hispaniola and the neighbouring regions—Guatemala and Yucatan and Honduras—where the Indians were dying out in a single generation before the whip and the cross, staggering under loads that the Spaniards would have hesitated to set on the backs of their mules, there seemed room but for the pirate, and

## Hereditary Foes

occasionally for the saint. But Juan was neither, only a fearless young soldier, too honest to play the part of the one, and too full of youth and life to play the part of the other. He had in him neither the stuff of a Vlasco Nunez, nor that of a Las Casas; and the Indies, such as they were just at that moment described by the home-returned soldier, had no fascination for his soul. After three or four years of garrison duty at Naples, where he found small opportunity for action or promotion, he returned home to Spain on a long leave of absence, impatient and dissatisfied, to see what interest could do for him in high quarters, little suspecting that he was returning to meet his fate in the person of his ancestral enemy's daughter.

With a father so dreamy and so absorbed in a life-search as hers, and no mother to watch over her, it was not to be expected that Rosita should be brought up like other girls of her rank. But even if these peculiar circumstances had not existed, the rigid rules of

## The Romance of the Fountain

control and seclusion which in the next two centuries, under the Philips, rendered the education of Spanish young ladies the wonder of Europe, had not yet been elaborated, and the heavy mantle of etiquette lay not yet on the land. The girl saw little of the daughters of her father's equals, but found friends for herself among the neighbouring peasants and farm hands of the castle, sharing their freedom and often their occupations, though never to the detriment of her inborn refinement. We must do her father the justice to say that he snatched many a half hour from his alchemistic studies to impart some of his own varied culture to his daughter, who, if she grew up wilder and freer and healthier than the damozels of her class, who were in the hands of the duenna and the priest, also developed in intelligence and knowledge, as they were never likely to do. She loved to stand sickle in hand with her humble companions in the great golden expanses of the corn, or stand with them on the ladder, picking the green and purple olives

## Hereditary Foes

that they poured into their hods, or join in the vintage in the weakening September sun, helping to heap the bunches in the great round vats that were carried into the castle yard. Or she would stroll with some freckled peasant maiden, her friend, nutting far away in the woods, or help in his bird-nesting some eight year old boy of the farm.

So there was no lack of opportunity, when love came to her one day in a more romantic shape than the formal request for her hand that would probably have been made to any other father than hers. And as fate would have it, love came from the enemy's camp. Juan saw her one fair summer evening, as she stood in the tall ripe corn in the sunset; and little guessing whose name she bore, gazed at her in her beauty, and felt his heart tighten with a wild wistful longing, not the evil blighting desire that her intelligence would have recognised and fled from, but a sudden illumination of his soul that told him that all that he wished to live for, all that he

## The Romance of the Fountain

wished to live with, was standing that moment before him. They stood a moment in silence. He spoke, she answered; they met again elsewhere, and yet again; and by the time they learned each other's name, their souls, their fates, were no longer their own, and an hour of love had obliterated centuries of hate.

But it was a terrible position. There was no possible issue that did not involve a break with everything that had hitherto been dear—home and friends and associations and prospects. There was no probability that the father of either would ever relent or forgive. To declare their love publicly was to rush into the arms of disaster, and to keep it secret was to live in continual fear. Juan's intentions were honourable; indeed respect was the very essence of his love. The idea of a secret marriage was abandoned as soon as broached. The consequences that it entailed would only have brought about the discovery and the wrath a few months later than an open avowal.

## Hereditary Foes

Such was the situation when Don Luis's decision to embark for the Indies on a wild and perilous quest, and take his daughter with him, seemed suddenly to bring matters to a head. Then Juan hesitated no longer, but urged Rosita with all the eloquence of love to break with the past and all her belongings, to marry him at once, and seek in flight an issue from an intolerable deadlock. It meant the end of all his dreams of success, all his prospects of fortune; but he saw no other way.

But Rosita was unshakable. She loved her fond dreamer of a father at bottom with a passionate love that could not requite the gentleness of years with desertion and betrayal.

"I cannot let him go to the Indies without me," she said firmly. "He is bent on the voyage, and I know him too well to persuade myself that he will ever abandon the project. He is going to the lands of fever, the lands of a thousand perils, and will need me there more than he ever has here. Do you suppose I could bear to think of his lying perhaps

## The Romance of the Fountain

helpless and abandoned in some primeval forest, calling on my name in vain, and dying for the lack of the help I might have given him? I will never desert him; never, never!"

"He is bent on a madman's quest," said Juan sternly; "and the maddest thing of all is his decision to take you with him to the Indies. It is you that will tremble with fever and fall with fatigue in the horrible swamps and jungles of the West, while it will be he that will abandon you to follow the glitter of his magic water. . . ."

"Mad or not," answered Rosita, "my place is by his side. We must trust in God and the future."

Again Juan pleaded against her resolution, pleaded with every argument of love and cruel presentiment; but all to no purpose. He could not shake her resolve, no more than she could shake her father's. When at last he realised the hopelessness of his appeal, he dropped it suddenly.

"Then I know what I shall do," he said.



## CHAPTER IV

### PREPARATIONS

DON LUIS was now surrounded from morning to night by adventurers from the Indies. The journey to Cadiz, the nearest and principal western port, was not long; and the castle now almost always sheltered two or three of them, who fattened on the best that it contained, at the easy expense of spinning improbable yarns for the benefit of its lord. His study was now filled to overflowing with maps, models of ships, globes, and nautical instruments, which replaced the alembics and crucibles of his now discarded alchemistic experiments. Some of his new friends had shared in the later voyages of Columbus, others were mere masters of ships that carried supplies to the now organised colony of Hispaniola, mostly ill-

## The Romance of the Fountain

shaven, woollen-capped, ignorant fellows, among whom was more than one whose antecedents would ill have borne enquiry. One of them, however, belonged to a somewhat different class. He had sailed as mate with Vasco de Gama and the Portuguese, had rounded the Cape of Storms, and had later entered the service of the Spaniards and held positions of some authority in their new possessions of the West. This man, by name Diego Perez, soon ousted the others in his patron's favour; took in his character at a glance; entered at once into his scheme—which he saw could be turned to his own advantage—and obtained in a few weeks a strange empire over his mind. They were daily closeted together for hours. It was already an understood thing that he was to be the dreamer's immediate subordinate in the expedition which he hoped to equip at no very distant date.

The more Don Luis thought over the matter, the more he felt persuaded that what he sought lay in the new Indies, or rather in the still

## Preparations

undiscovered islands that lay beyond them. And now Diego Perez daily brought him some new item, some new idea, that tended to confirm his belief, and had the skill to make him imagine that the new suggestion had occurred to his own mind.

"It is wonderful," he said to his patron one day, "how a solitary thinker in his silent study will sometimes anticipate the discoveries which the man of action is making thousands of miles away in the world of concrete things. When the abstract reasoner and the practical pioneer come to the same conclusion, each from his own materials; when they both suspect a great and deep-hidden secret from utterly different indications, you may be pretty sure that those double clues lead to a great reality. I don't pretend to understand by what processes of reasoning, by what successive steps, you came to the thought that the great treasure you were seeking lay in the Western Indies; I only know that it was an intuition of genius. A hundred trifles that forced themselves on

## The Romance of the Fountain

me in Hispaniola and Yucatan confirm it. I told you what the Indian Cabeza Blanca told me. . . ."

"Then you really share my belief," Don Luis interrupted, "that the wonderful water is not supernatural, but only a fountain of transcendent medicinal virtue?"

"I am certain of it," answered Diego Perez, "but it is all the surer for that. It is a natural mineral spring of unexampled potency. It evidently contains youth-restoring elements that are unknown to mankind; and, as I have said, it lies in the land of Bimini."

"Strange," said his patron, "there is a passage in Presepius about a wonderful invigorating mineral, which Beckerius in his Commentary calls *Sal Juventutis*. No modern author has been able to identify it. Perhaps the Fountain has flowed over deep beds of it."

"I should think it very likely," said the other. "I took notes at the time of what the Indians told me about it. I have them somewhere. I must try and find them."

## Preparations

Unfortunately, it was just at the time of my quarrel with Rovedo about some absurd slaves of his that I mistook for rebel natives and shut up in a barn and roasted. So I had to leave the place in a hurry. I had been collecting information right and left for future use. Ah, if only I had been Governor of Hispaniola at that moment, with ships and men at my disposal, instead of a simple hidalgo with the shadow of the gallows flitting over him, and the feel of the rope itching on his neck! I tell you there are realms beyond Hispaniola that no man but myself suspects, not uncivilised islands like Hispaniola and Cuba, with miserable populations that are only fit to toil under the lash like worn-out mules and broken-kneed horses; but realms with great cities and temples and organised millions, that might be conquered with a few falconets and a dozen kegs of powder. There are temple treasuries of gold and pearls and rubies only waiting to be sacked, mines of precious metal by the side of which those of

## The Romance of the Fountain

Hispaniola are as a beggar's purse to an emperor's. . . ."

"Never mind the gold and the pearls," Don Luis interrupted impatiently; "what of the water?"

"Ah, the water!" Perez repeated. "Of course; I was forgetting. The gold and the gems are insignificant beside it. Well, as I was saying, there can be no doubt that it lies in that realm of Bimini which I should certainly have reached if only I had not unfortunately been under a cloud, and unable to get a hearing from those in power. I often talked to the Indians on the subject. One Indian especially used to tell me about it. He had been carried out to sea by the tide in his canoe, had drifted to the coasts of Bimini, and had lived there three years. . . ."

"And how many of the inhabitants were ever young? For I take it for granted that the use of the Fountain was limited; else they would increase beyond measure and starve."

"It was only their King who was ever

## Preparations

young, and the few he allows to share the draught. He alone had the secret of the place where the Fountain is hidden. But if an invader could seize his person, he could soon be made to reveal it. You might leave that to me."

"And did you ask your Indian whether he looked transcendently young?"

"He looked about twenty," answered Diego Perez. "My Indian friend had often seen him. But he was centuries old."

"It is curious," said Don Luis, "that the people never extorted the secret from their monarch. They might then all have been young."

"They are a submissive race," the other replied, "at least if they are like the other Indians I have known. And as I said yesterday, a small well-appointed Spanish force would soon split open their country like a cocoanut. You see, they have no gunpowder—only arrows and javelins. A handful of our men—such men as have fought under Consalvo

## The Romance of the Fountain

de Cordova, for instance—would suffice. We have irresistible weapons; some, for example, that the Holy Office could lend us, if the King of the Magic Water were too hard of persuasion. I have tried that sort of thing on the Indians myself with excellent results."

"Well, between you and me," said the Seeker of Youth thoughtfully, "though I have never for one moment wavered in my belief as to the Fount of Youth itself—no man could be so mad as that after all that has been written on the subject—yet I have always had my doubts as to the wonders with which report has surrounded it. I always suspected the dragons and other monsters that are said to protect it. But the idea that its potency is natural is entirely new, and certainly simplifies matters."



## CHAPTER V

### A ROYAL AUDIENCE

As the head of a younger branch of one of the greatest families of Spain, Don Luis de Medrana had numerous friends and relatives at court; and if only he could obtain the King's ear, made no doubt of arousing his interest in the great quest which he proposed to undertake. The Fountain of Youth was universally believed in; its existence was taken for granted by rich and poor, by great and small; and Ferdinand the Catholic had no more reason to doubt of it than anybody else. The only mystery was its exact situation. This the Seeker believed himself to have very nearly located; and by the time that his friends had succeeded in obtaining for him the promise of an audience,

## The Romance of the Fountain

he was ready with details far more concrete and far less fabulous than those he had found in the yellow folios of his library, or in the traditions of Jew and Moor, and was prepared to submit to the king a scheme which, given the universal belief in the existence of the magic spring, had a very fair chance of being listened to, and in no wise implied that its author was a dreamer or a dupe.

Ferdinand was at Valladolid. On the particular morning for which the audience had been fixed, he was in a fretful mood, due partly to a more than usually present consciousness of the growing aches and infirmities of age, and partly to an unsatisfactory report which he had been reading on the gold supply of Hispaniola. He was putting the last touches to his toilet with the assistance of the Marquis of Villarica, his confidential groom of the chamber.

“Hand me my dagger and my gold chain,” the King was saying. “I can recall the time, Villarica, when my white bony fingers were so

## A Royal Audience

plump, that I could scarce force these same rings on or off. And now they are continually trickling off of themselves."

"Your Grace has thinned from overmuch thought, not from years," answered the Marquis. "Believe me, it is not age, but care and study. Your Grace needs only repose to gain in flesh."

The King shook his head.

"I wish my ribs and fingers had remained as plump as thy flattery," he said; "for that, my friend, continues in all its fat exuberance. Who stands inscribed for private audience, first on this morning's list?"

"The Suitor, your Grace vouchsafes to see to please the Duke of Arcos."

"Don Luis de Medrana?" said the King with a frown. "He has some plan or other beyond sea, has he not? If I had not given my royal word to Arcos, I wouldn't waste my patience in listening to his project; and as it is, I mean to give him ten minutes' audience, not one more. Yet another of those seekers of the West! As if I hadn't wasted sufficient time

## The Romance of the Fountain

and thought and ships and money on the irksome rogues who promise such wonders! To begin with, that arch-knave Columbus, in whose dreams my good lamented Queen put such sweet faith. Oh, we were so certain of the gains; it was so clear and easy. You had only to find the East by sailing to the West—only to reach the sun by flying to the moon—and all the treasures of auriferous Ind would flow into your lap in rivers of ingots. We were to reach the ruby-rolling torrents beyond Bagdad, the porcelain-towered cities of the Grand Khan of Tartary and what not, where the streets were paved with slabs of silver, the houses roofed with tiles of gold; where the very beggars were dressed in yellow silk, with pearls in the bonnets they held out to beg for diamond pence. Much gold we got! A little less than you would find to-day in any goldsmith's shop of Cordova or Burgos! . . ."

"And yet," said the Marquis, "that Genoese set up your Grace's standard in more than one island where it still flutters. I shall never

## A Royal Audience

forget the day when he returned from his first daring voyage, amid the acclamations of the people, bringing his Indians with him."

"Bringing his Indians? A dozen red-skinned savages, wild scoundrels with no attire but a nose-ring—and mighty fit raiment it was for the islands of swamp and ague they came from. . . . And while we were losing time in crazy western plans, the Portuguese, by creeping patiently eastwards, round by the Cape of Storms, reached Muscat and Calicut, made treaties with their sultans, plundered cities, and filled their ships with gold. No, no, my friend; don't talk to me of further western projects."

"Will your Grace see him?" asked Villarica.

"I suppose I must, since I have pledged my word to Arcos. And besides, his birth entitles him to a hearing. He was one of my pages in his youth. But bid him cut his speeches short. Ten minutes, not one more."

As Don Luis entered, Ferdinand did not wait even to let him finish the deep obeisance with

## The Romance of the Fountain

which he bowed before him, but addressed him testily then and there.

"And so thou too," he cried, "hast got a wonderful western scheme, an expedition that is to pour more gold into my coffers than all the ships of Christendom put together can carry, eh?"

"I crave the most humble pardon of my Liege," answered the Suitor, while an almost imperceptible smile flitted over his grave mystic face. "My Liege has been misinformed. I have not come to offer your Grace new mines of gold, but with your most royal licence, to rid you of your silver."

"Of my silver?" exclaimed the King. "My friends and flatterers already do that most perfectly. Thy help, good friend, is not needed."

"I have come to offer your Grace the means by which the clear white silver upon your royal brow shall be transmuted back to the darker locks of youth."

"Is he a merchant of the Venetian hair-dye?"

## A Royal Audience

asked Ferdinand, turning to the Marquis of Villarica.

The Suitor winced, but recovered himself at once.

"Your Grace has made me bite my lip," he said with another deep inclination. "But if I could have the patience of your royal ear for a few short minutes, I think I could fetter your attention."

"Speak on, but not in riddles," said Ferdinand. "I will listen."

"I know as well as any," the other resumed, "that the West and the Indies of Columbus have somewhat belied men's dreams of gold and gems. But they contain another treasure of such wonderful value, of such extreme and ineffable price to him who shall first make it his, that all the gold that men have clutched at in their wildest imaginings, would be but dross by its side."

"Indeed, and what is that?" said the King somewhat ironically.

"The Fountain of Youth. We know from

## The Romance of the Fountain

certain and undoubtable informations, that the Spring which man has panted for during countless generations in every clime and in every age, with a wistful and infinite thirst, lies in the Western Indies, in a realm north of Hispaniola, named Bimini, whose King, the sole possessor of the secret, is called the Ever Beautiful, and has reigned six hundred years."

"Bad for the heir apparent," muttered Villarica under his breath.

"No shapes of magic," went on Don Luis, "guard the potent spring. No circling dragons watch it by day and night. No evil angels sit by its brink and mirror their dark wings in its waves. It hath neither spell nor supernatural essence, but is mere natural water—a single little rill—which in its bright limpidity hath flowed through subterranean channels, over beds of mineral ore and salts unknown to man, or through a filter of medicinal mosses, of such high potency and curative virtue, that they can arrest the onward march of age, can



## A Royal Audience

create anew the wasted tissues of the body, and fill with fresh sap the withered branches of life."

"What hides it then?" asked Ferdinand. "What protects it from the common herd of mankind?"

"The dreadful guard of Nature," the Suitor answered; "inextricable forests and morasses, haunts of the panther and of every clawed assassin, in whose clueless tangle and pestilential depths no white man has ever yet ventured; where the twilight awakens in every tree a vampire bat, who fans the sleeper with his monstrous leather wings, and sucks his blood at night; where there are trees whose dark silent leaves distil a subtle vapour that converts sleep into death, and strange treacherous flowers whose scent breeds madness, till the forest rings with crazy laughter; where, among the grasses, there lurk porcupines that shoot a venomous quill, whereof the wound turns black like the flesh of a mushroom; where there are snakes that make a running noose round your throat

## The Romance of the Fountain

and strangle you in sleep, before you have time to feel their coils. Man-eating Indians, whose poisoned arrows, shot by an unseen hand, change the blood into liquid fire in every vein, infest the dreadful region."

He paused, and waited for the King to speak. Ferdinand had listened with attention, and now looked at his visitor with incredulity perhaps, but not with the impatience of a few minutes before.

"And thou proposest to ransack such a region for a rill, for a mere hidden trickling thread of water?" he said.

"Were that my thought," the other answered, "your Grace might well call me mad. No; my plan is this: to land a small picked force, armed with three falconets and sufficient powder, on the Biminian coast, and with the help of the disaffected tribes—for such I know there are—to march boldly on the capital and seize the King, and then extort the secret of the Fountain as his ransom. I could defray part of the expenses of the expedition out of

## A Royal Audience

my own private fortune, if your Grace would furnish me with three ships and their crews. Half of the soldiers could be shipped at Hispaniola. The conquest of Bimini would be profitable to the Church : for, once having made the Indian monarch's body ours, we could attack his soul, and win it back from his unholy gods. The Holy Office would find the means of teaching his people the greater sweetness of our more merciful faith."

"If he has reigned six hundred years, I fear his errors must be deep rooted," said Ferdinand. "What is thy Biminian King's name?"

"Atalpa, the Ever Young, so please your Grace."

"North of Hispaniola, thou sayest? How far north?"

"Three hundred leagues of water, according to my computations; but I admit that the distance is only approximate."

The King's brow had grown thoughtful. For a few moments he seemed to forget the

## The Romance of the Fountain

presence of his visitor, and to lose himself in the past or the future.

"I cannot grant thee longer speech this morning," he said at last, "but I will give thee next week another and more ample audience. Meanwhile, write out thy scheme more fully."

And giving Don Luis his hand to kiss, he dismissed him with a not ungracious nod.

When the door had closed on his visitor, the King walked up and down the room for a while.

"Strange, very strange," he said, stopping and addressing the Marquis. "Is this the dream of a madman, based on mere air, or hath it weight and substance? What dost thou think, Villarica?"

"Like your Grace," the Marquis answered, "I chew the cud of my perplexity. It seems to me unnatural that the Fountain should be mere natural water. Supernatural water would be far more natural."

"The Fountain exists," said Ferdinand. "That

## A Royal Audience

much is a certain and unquestioned fact. It exists on some point or other of the earth. We have abundant testimony to that. Then why not in the Indies?—It would be strange if I were to live to bless that rogue Columbus for finding me those unprofitable islands. I wonder whether the draught would keep me as I now am, and merely keep at bay the further years, or whether it would place me back in the strongest moment of manhood,—such as I was, for instance, on that triumphant morning when Isabel and I rode side by side through the trembling alleys of Granada, at last made ours?”

He resumed his walk up and down.

“The wide and general use of such a cordial would be full of peril,” he soliloquised, “and would very soon over-populate the earth. We should have to imitate the policy of the Indian king, and jealously guard the Fountain from the general mass of mankind. Its use would have to be strictly confined to my own self and to the finder, or all would drink and live.

## The Romance of the Fountain

A pretty state of things if Gaffer Maximilian or the Pope were each made immortal on his throne! . . . An eternal King of France would never do. But if the King of Aragon were immortal, the case would be somewhat different. 'How time flies! How white my hair has become in these last twelve months. . . . And my old hands, how thin and white and veiny they have grown. . . . A little more, and I shall have to bid the goldsmith come, to tighten my rings.'

## CHAPTER VI

### THE START

So the King's interest in the scheme having been secured, and the necessary orders sent forth, in a very few months the new expedition was in full preparation. Ferdinand had been more liberal of money than any one could have expected; and the mortgages on Don Luis's lands—almost equivalent to the total sale, and practically constituting the surrender of his fortune—had brought in a very considerable sum. From the dim shadow of a mystic's study, the project had passed into the noisy sunlight of arsenal and port. The mystic himself had become a commander, dealing no longer with dreams and traditions, but with

## The Romance of the Fountain

concrete men and concrete things—sailors and soldiers, dockyard officials, pikes and swords, cannon and powder, and all the provisions of a long ocean voyage.

The men were recruited mainly at Cadiz, which was full of time-expired soldiers from Italy and elsewhere. Many of them had been to the Indies already—nay, more than once. Other men, and further provisions of war, were to be picked up at Hispaniola, where the Governor was ordered to lend all the assistance in his power, and where all were to rest for a while, before setting sail on the unexplored waters beyond.

Small though the expedition was, it included men from nearly all the still ill-welded provinces of Ferdinand's monarchy. Nearly all the dialects of the Peninsula might have been heard among them, from the harsh and unintelligible Basque of the North to the soft and familiar Andalusian of the South. The men were of all ages and character, and had served in the most opposite parts of the



## The Start

world; and they retained, in whole or in part, the dress and accoutrements of the various corps to which they had belonged. But, for all that, they had one thing in common, adventurers and scratch crew though they were. They had all of them that military quality which was making the Spanish infantry the admiration of Europe—a quality which was the result of centuries of Moorish warfare, of a climate uniting the bitterest extremes of sun and snow and wind, of religious fanaticism, and of a dare-devil spirit that the Devil alone could perhaps have explained.

Nothing could exceed Don Luis's activity. He and Diego Perez were daily on their feet from early morning till dusk, seeing to the equipping of the two vessels—the third was to be fitted out at Hispaniola—and the enrolment of the men. Nor surely would any one have recognised the stooping grey-bearded scholar with the dark-brown robe and wistful careworn face in the alert and commanding figure with the shining steel cap

## The Romance of the Fountain

and breastplate, who, waving his long bright rapier in his gauntleted hand, was reviewing his company on the noisy wharf, before finally embarking on the wonderful quest. The success of his application to the King, and the conversion of his vague surmises into the sights and sounds of tangible enterprise, had indeed transfigured him beyond recognition. He seemed twenty years younger, and the Water of Youth seemed to have acted on its indefatigable votary even before he had found it.

But active and busy as Don Luis showed himself, the soldiers and crews soon discovered that he was the commander of the expedition only in name. Though Diego Perez made a great show of taking his patron's orders in every question that arose, it was always his suggestion that was ultimately carried out, his will that ultimately prevailed. And indeed it could scarcely have been otherwise; even if there had been nothing in the two men's characters to account for such a relation

## The Start

between them. For in all practical details, the efficiency of the Dreamer's lieutenant, or Chief Captain, as he was called, was unchallenged. He had sailed too many seas, had dealt with men of too many races, had engaged in too many hard practical schemes, for the men not instinctively to recognise which was the real master, which of the two it was the more dangerous to disobey. Perez was too completely the type of the pirate-adventurer of his century, not to command the respect, though never the love, of a typical crew. And the Seeker of Youth, on the other hand, had brought with him too many dreams and too many compunctions, too much that was vague and unreal, for him ever to be a leader of men.

Nothing that could conduce to diminish for Rosita the strain and distress of the great voyage was omitted. Her tiny cabin in the larger of the two vessels starting from Cadiz had been fitted up with every comfort and dainty adornment that a jubilant father's

## The Romance of the Fountain

fondness had been able to devise for so limited a space. Even before going on board, she had won the affection of the men. She had already found numerous occasions of showing kindness to the mothers or wives or sweet-hearts they were leaving behind them. It was seldom—indeed, perhaps the first time—that a girl of her rank and delicate beauty had embarked for the new Indies of the West; and cruel and hardened to the horrors of war as were the adventurers her father had collected, there were many among them who could still feel something like a chivalrous devotion to the Fairy Princess that was about to be exposed to dangers that they knew but too well.

Rosita was leaving Europe without having bidden her lover farewell. Juan de Alvareda had suddenly disappeared without a word of explanation or warning soon after the expedition was officially decreed. Some said that he had left for Naples to take up his soldiering under his old standards. Others declared that

## The Start

he had gone to Valladolid to hang about the court for some civil employment. The only thing that was certain was that he had left Andalusia, and had left it in haste. In her heart there was an aching void. As she sat in the stern of the ship, gazing at the dwindling shore of the land of her birth, on the steeples and roofs she was perhaps leaving for ever, what troubled her most was her fear for his safety. She knew well enough that he would never have let her leave as she was leaving, if he had been a free agent. That he had forsaken her never even entered her mind. But as she thought of his inexplicable silence, Spain, which was fading in the dusk and the distance, seemed to hold nothing but doubt; while the western horizon, where the sun had gone down, and for which they were sailing, hid but the dread and the unknown.

## CHAPTER VII

### IN HISPANIOLA

AND now let us turn to Juan de Alvareda and explain his mysterious disappearance.

When he had been informed of Don Luis's determination to embark for the Indies and take Rosita with him, he had, as we have seen, at first hoped to persuade her to abandon her home and marry him clandestinely somewhere in Europe. But when nothing that he could urge could shake her decision to accompany her father, he at once formed a plan to share under a feigned name in the proposed expedition, so as at least to be able to watch over her and protect her from the dangers to which he foresaw she would be exposed. But it seemed to him better to pick up the ships at Hispaniola

## In Hispaniola

than to enlist in Spain where he was known. As soon therefore as the King's decree appointing Don Luis de Medrana commander of the little squadron was published and preparations openly begun, he started for Palos, preferring that port to Cadiz, where he would probably have been recognised. At Palos he learnt that a ship was on the point of weighing anchor for the new colony. It was too good an opportunity to miss. So securing a passage upon it, he wrote a letter to Rosita, informing her of his movements, and entrusted it to a friar who was leaving for Cadiz. This letter the friar lost, and Rosita was in consequence never apprized of his departure for the Indies, but was allowed to eat away her heart in uncertainty.

And if in her doubt of what had become of him, dark pictures of danger crowded her dreams, they were probably no darker than what actually befell. The long voyage out, through weeks and weeks of stormy seas, was in his case perhaps no worse than what a crossing of the Atlantic had to be in those days,

## The Romance of the Fountain

in a ship that the waves played with like a nutshell that dances on a pond in the wind, and in the company of convicts and negroes, of adventurers and slavers, and of but few honest men. Yet all went comparatively well till Hispaniola was sighted. But then the crash came. Her tortured imagination might have seen a ship going to pieces on the desolate rocks; a huddled crowd of survivors fighting for a few miserable shell-fish with the fury of starving hounds. And then again in her dream she might have recognised a familiar figure in one of two men who volunteered to swim the arm of raging sea that divided the rocks from the land, push through the great tangled forests and frightful uninhabited glens in search of some settlement, and send help to the others.

Juan's comrade was a convict who still wore a shackle-ring on one of his feet, and was branded on brow and on back. That quarter of the great island had as yet but few settlements. What still remained of the natives had



## In Hispaniola

been gathered by the Spaniards round the mines and in distant plantations; and wild beasts had the rest pretty much to themselves. After days and days of wading through almost impenetrable undergrowth, of climbing along mountain ridges, and plunging deep down into valleys that seemed to lead nowhere, the convict was bitten by a snake, and died in a dreadful convulsion. Juan was left to push on alone through the horrible solitude, living on a few nuts and berries, ever endeavouring to keep to one direction with the help of the implacable sun by day, of the burning constellations by night. Oh, the intolerable stare of those stars, pulsing and throbbing in their uncountable multitudes: now seeming bent on maddening him by their silent consciousness of his plight, and now again, on a revulsion of his mood, seeming to add to his loneliness by their utter unconsciousness of what they looked down on but did not see! Then one day he suddenly stumbled on a white man and an Indian, both in a physical condition yet more lamentable

## The Romance of the Fountain

than his own. The white man told him that he had been condemned to hard labour, and that he and the Indian had escaped together from a gang to which they belonged. They had built themselves a sort of stifling hut, and the Indian had constructed some traps with which they caught small creatures of the forest, enough to satisfy hunger for the moment. Juan shared their life for some time, when suddenly one day the three were surprised and overpowered by a party of Spaniards searching for runaways, and, heavily chained, were dragged to the nearest gold mines. He would have found no difficulty in persuading his captors of his rank and antecedents; but they were in want of hands, and it was more convenient to assume that he was a runaway slave and incorporate him in one of the gangs. While he was waiting for the overseer to dispose of him, he had leisure to observe the gangs at their work. This, where he happened to be, consisted in clearing the forest round a steep gully. He saw enormous tree-trunks being dragged by thirty Indians and

## In Hispaniola

six convicts under the long curling lashes of their warders, their naked and sore-covered bodies writhing as they panted up the steep hill slope in a sort of horrible human harness. And he might have seen worse ; for the native population of Hispaniola was driven over the brink of existence in a single generation. It is written in the soul-book of the white man for his children to read at their leisure.

The next day Juan was afforded an opportunity of trying the system in person. Through the whole of the endless twelve hours he formed part of the terrible team ; the whip coming down in continual whirling lashes on the dark naked shoulders beside him, then suddenly on his own. Tree after tree was dragged up the slope. Then night covered all for a while, and the teams were locked up in long stifling sheds. There his thoughts were too crowded to take effectual shape. They seemed continually to relapse into numbness and pain, but not into sleep. The hideous vision of endless days like the one he had passed kept mixing with the thought of

## The Romance of the Fountain

Rosita, with fear for her safety, with the idea that she would sail forth into the unknown ocean without him.

The first whiteness of dawn stole in through the chinks; the sleeping forms of his companions in misery detached themselves slowly from out of the darkness. Juan was near to the door, against which lay a warder asleep. It was the man whose lash had fallen that day on his shoulders pitilessly, unremittingly. He saw the handle of a knife peeping out from the man's sash. He crept up and possessed himself of it. He had the man at his mercy. A quick silent blow, and he would have been free. The temptation was terrific, but he could not do it. He could not cross over to Rosita on the stepping-stone of murder.

Again another horrible day in the team. Then, before the men were again locked up for the night, they were searched. The knife had been missed, and was found on his person. He was bound tightly with thongs, and thrown into a shed by himself.

## In Hispaniola

This time, as he lay in the darkness, he seemed to have no thoughts whatsoever; nothing but the swelling pain and the throb of his tightened-down arteries, hour after hour. Suddenly a hand passed groping over his face and over his thongs. A few quick cuts, and he staggered up. When his cramped limbs could move, a hand led him through the dark clearing into the forest, and the dawn showed him a hideously emaciated Indian woman, and a no less emaciated child of six or seven. What her motive had been in cutting his thongs he never discovered, as they had no common language; but she shared with him freely the small provision of food that she carried; and when that was exhausted, she showed extraordinary ingenuity in providing more from trees and plants that he would never have found by himself. He on his side helped her by carrying the child when it seemed to be dying and could tramp no more through the bush. Whither they were bound he neither knew nor could ask. And day after day they toiled on, till one

## The Romance of the Fountain

evening at sunset she suddenly stopped, and placing in his hand a little leaf-wrapped packet tied with plaited grass, pointed through the trees of the ridge on which they stood, at the sea and human dwellings far away at their feet. He gazed long at the bright blue expanse. When again he turned round, the woman and the child had disappeared in the forest.

The packet contained five small nuggets of red virgin gold, which later served him in good stead. He made his way down to the little port. Three ships lay there at anchor amid other craft, while boats plied continually between them and the shore. They were the ships of Don Luis, who, with the help of the Governor, was completing his armament and enlisting new men for his voyage in the waters beyond. Later Juan, standing on the wharf in the crowd of sailors, of semi-starved Indians, of newly landed negroes, of armed buff-booted planters, of white-and-black Dominicans, distinctly recognised on one of the ships the

## In Hispaniola

Seeker of Youth, and Diego Perez, and Rosita herself. But whether she would have known him again as he stood there, is doubtful enough ; for surely he himself would never have recognised his face in a mirror.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BECALMED

Two months later, the largest of these same ships lay in the unknown ocean, leagues and leagues beyond Hispaniola, becalmed and motionless. It was the nineteenth day since her sails, like the wings of an exhausted bird, had flapped their last, and dropped limp and useless. Before the calm had set in, she had parted company with the two other vessels that made up the little squadron. The white-hot sun had, as one of the sailors expressed it, stewed the sea to syrup, and so thick that the ship, enclosed in sticky coils, stuck like a spoon that stands of itself. The water in the tanks was ebbing steadily away, and the



## Becalmed

hand of death seemed to be tightening round the parching throats of the crew, who were beginning to mutter that the curse of God was upon them. For even before the present horrible drought and immobility, and while the vessel was still cleaving the unknown waves, the superstitious reluctance of the sailors had begun to make them see strange sights and dreadful omens. Skeletons had swum one evening like sharks in the wake of the ship. One of the crew had given the alarm. He had seen the first of them raise his long white arm above the water. It was when the sun was almost on a level with the wave. A blood-red glare had been suddenly thrown on the sea under the lurid orb, just like the crimson flag that is thrown under the wild eye of the bull in the arena. Then the whole sea had glowed like a pool of newly-shed gore; and one by one they had seen, or thought they had seen, the skulls and arm-bones cresting every wave behind the ship as far as eye could reach, until all the

## The Romance of the Fountain

countless dead who lie unburied in the depths of the ocean, had risen to the surface and given chase. But the ship had out-sailed them.

Then there had been that great white fog off Cape Cardozo, when they had seen the giants, towering above the mast by head and shoulders, and looming like monstrous shadows through the vapour, now lighter and now darker, as they waded further or nearer round the ship. But luckily the fog had thickened and hidden the vessel; for if one of them had caught sight of it, he would doubtless have plucked it out of the water by the mast, and whirled it like a sling round his head.

But the worst of all had been the Wind of Whispers, that blew for three whole days in despite of prayer, of exorcism, of holy water, saying to each man a different thing of horror in his own mother's voice, as if from a great distance. To one it had said nine times distinctly: "I can see thee sinking through

## Becalmed

a hundred fathoms; and fish swim after thee."

And now they were sticking motionless in the measureless ocean with never a breath to sway the white dangling sails, or make a ripple on its thickening surface. By-and-by the moon would come and have her stare at them, and turn the fetid sea into a Satan's mirror. And then the water-witches would rise up and swim round the vessel, even as they had for many a night, croaking their song of death. They came so close that some of the sailors swore they could see the wrinkles on their cheeks and on their knotty fingers. The sea-hags had swum their dance the night before in all their numbers: there must have been a hundred of them in the reel. Their hair was old grey sea-weed, and each of them wore a necklace of drowned men's teeth. They had once been young and beautiful—the whitest of the mermaids. But they had betrayed the secret of the ocean treasure, so they had been stricken old and cursed for

## The Romance of the Fountain

ever. And now they wrought the horror of the sea, and stirred up tempests with their songs and their spells. Did not every sailor know, that down in their green and slimy caves, they spun the thread of every ship's voyage, and when they cut the thread it went down? Was it not they who, with a twirl of the thumb, set the towering water-spouts rotating, that overwhelmed ships and crews; and who, with a touch of the finger, made a ship spring a leak that no pumps could keep down? And were the whirlpools of ocean not born of the great reels that they danced in the depths, faster and ever faster? And now was it not they who had becalmed the ship, till perhaps the crew would have to drink of each other's veins, and thirst would end in madness and laughter, in dancing and death? . . . Look; the moon is cropping up on the horizon, as round as a silver dish. And, by gum! there are the hags already. Look, yonder in the moonshine, one of them is rolling like a porpoise. And now, look, look—a second and

## Becalmed .

a third. Ho, ho, the lewd old sea-maids! . . . How they gambol! And the men of the midnight watches would see them in their multitudes form their great circle round the ship, and would hear their weird singing, prophetic of the mischief of the sea.

And even as they had suddenly risen up, so the water-witches, after a while, would disappear as suddenly again into the depths.

"What art thou looking at so hard, now that the sea-hags are gone?" said one of the sailors to his mate a little later. "Answer: what art thou staring at?"

"Look just a little to the left of the moon, on the water-line. Dost thou not see something?" replied the other.

"It looks like an island. Very strange. It was not there half an hour ago," said the first man. "It has three peaks, with the valleys clear between them. It isn't twenty miles off. We must have drifted with an unfelt current. Call Sanchez. Where's the Commander?"

## The Romance of the Fountain

"In his cabin, deep in thought," rejoined his companion.

"Thinking how to get us a little water for our cracking throats?"

"Yes ; from the Fount of Youth."

## CHAPTER IX

### MOON-SHADOWS

IN the dark shadow which the useless tackle of the becalmed ship threw on the moonlit deck, a man stood, shunning observation. Juan de Alvareda was impatiently watching the few sailors who still lingered on deck go down one by one, till only the lookout remained at the other end of the vessel. Would she never come? he thought. But she was right to be prudent; for the danger to both of them was great. How she had started that day when, after they had weighed anchor at Hispaniola, her eyes, looking vaguely round her, had suddenly met his, and had recognised him under his disguise! The Chief Captain's eye

## The Romance of the Fountain

had fastened on her with a quick suspicion, and he, Juan, had thought all lost. Would he be able through the rest of the voyage to keep his face, his gestures, his tongue, in the control which his part exacted? Would he be able to check his rage when he should hear the officers and men speak rashly of her beauty, or see them fix their looks of hungry insolence on her face? Had he not heard, that very day, two sailors call her the destined prize of the Chief Captain? And had his knife not almost leapt of itself out of his sash? And she, could she control her glorious eyes, and meet him twenty times a day, and never so much as give him one quick look for other eyes to catch? Oh, who could measure the danger of the part they had to play? And yet how else, if he was to protect her from perils still more threatening which the folly of her mad dreamer of a father was about to plunge her into, in unknown lands, in his great search for Youth? How else, how else, if he was ever to win that truer



## Moon-Shadows

Fount of Youth and loveliness which sparkled in her eyes, and rippled over in light waves of magic when she spoke,—that truer, brighter Fount from which his soul had taken such delicious draughts? How old the world would seem to him without it! how cold and dull all earthly things would become! . . . But there she came, threading her way through the tackle, keeping to the shadows. . . .

"I couldn't sleep for thinking of the peril you're in," said Rosita in the lowest of whispers.

"Your life hangs on a thread."

"Were this a time for conceits," he answered, "I should say the thread of gold that fastens it to yours. The danger is less than you think."

"If you were recognised in this disguise, no help on earth could save you."

"We'll control our eyes. Why, I'd wrap the cloak of peril seven times round me, if I wore it as your livery."

"I wish you were not here."

"Did you think," he asked, "that I could

## The Romance of the Fountain

stay behind, and let you face all the treachery of the Ocean, on the way to unknown lands, and not watch over you? Did you think I could remain in Spain, while you were seeking a frightful country, in whose forests the Indian and the tiger will make friends to meet a white invader? Oh, not I. Your father is taking you to lands whose dreadful breath will kill the roses on your cheek, whose heat will scorch all the dewdrops of your gladness. In his mad search for his own lost youth, he is sacrificing yours."

"Alas, I know it," she answered.

"Before we set sail from Spain," he said, "I had a plan, as you know, to save you from the mad folly of a dreamer, and carry you away; but accident prevented. One day, though, I mean to do it yet, when chance befriends me, and bear you back to Europe."

"I can only answer as I answered in Spain," she said sadly. "I cannot do it. Did you not say this very moment that we are sailing for pestilential regions? Who will nurse him,

## Moon-Shadows

should he sicken when he gets there? I am the only thing he loves."

"He has no love but the Fountain of Youth," said Juan.

"Yes, but of living things, I am the one he loves best."

"And loving you the less of the two, do you think I will let him step between yourself and me, and rob me of my love?"

"Another shadow than his may step between us," Rosita said gravely.

"How another?"

"Two nights ago," she answered, "I had a dream of death."

"Oh, my love!" he cried.

"Ay, a dream of death," she repeated. "I was standing alone in an immense cave temple, whose thick-set pillars, hewn out of the solid rock, supported a heavy vault, that seemed to crush out the spirit. The lurid flicker of countless torches danced on the stone. But all was empty. Suddenly a clash as of a thousand cymbals shook the vault; and

## The Romance of the Fountain

starting out of the shadow, innumerable dusky warriors enclosed me in the horror of a dizzy war-dance, with guttural cries that grew ever louder—the hideous circle of painted demons closing ever nearer round me, brandishing their javelins, while I stood and trembled in the frightful centre; until at last they reached and overwhelmed me beneath their numbers. Then, blindfolded, they led me through the endless echoing caverns, chanting in an unknown language which somehow I could understand, a measured chant of ‘Lo, the Victim!—We bring her to the Goddess, the Destroyer. We bring her to the Murdering Beauty, the Flower of Cruelty, the Wonderful Executioner of Nature.’ And as we wound along in a slow procession with measured tramp, a strange narcotic odour, at once delicious and terrible, grew stronger and stronger, till it was as intolerable as pain. Then we halted, and I heard them cry in a pealing voice, ‘Now lay her in the lap of the Great Merciless.’ And then they raised me as if

## Moon-Shadows

upon an altar, while strange snake-like coils, which were not snakes, but which felt like fleshy thongs, wound round and round my throat, round and round my limbs and body, elastic and irresistible. I felt my body changing into pulp; and in the middle of the monstrous agony I woke."

"A hideous and most horrible dream," said Juan with a shudder.

"What do you suppose the murderous goddess was?" asked Rosita.

"I think it was an empty fear—the strangling goddess we call Nightmare," he answered, "born of this frightful leaden heat."

But Rosita shook her head.

"Love, I think not," she said. "I think it was a presage of something in the future; a foresight of a fate that awaits me out there."

"Whatever it is, it shall be kissed away—— But, hush! I see Diego Perez there in the moonlight; and he must not find us so near

## The Romance of the Fountain

together. Every time I see him fix his eyes on you, it sets my fingers playing with my knife. Slip back into your cabin. He must not come upon us here——”

And each separately disappeared among the cross shadows of the moonlit rigging.

## CHAPTER X

### SHIP'S TALK

ALTHOUGH the shadowy and elusive islands that had loomed for so many centuries far away on the western horizon, had recently consolidated into the very real possession of Hispaniola and its neighbouring regions, the West was still the realm of the fabulous, the chosen seat of all that men could conceive in the way of the wonderful; while beyond what had been found, lay the still unfound, full of the marvellous, the terrible, and the supernatural. It was not strange, therefore, that even the officers of Don Luis, in the long monotonous hours when the ship lay becalmed, allowed their imagination to weave every sort of wonder with respect to the unknown country

## The Romance of the Fountain

that lay before them, and its unknown inhabitants. Some said that they were giants, others that they were dwarfs. According to one, the people of Bimini were amphibious; their cities were built in lakes and paved with dark-green water, like oozy Venice. They could stay [for hours at the bottom like otters, then rise up suddenly and shoot a flight of arrows, and dive once more to the bottom. According to another, they lived like rabbits in subterranean burrows, with unseen issues; and often all of a sudden, in the desert, armies would start up from cities that were unsuspected underfoot, then vanish as unexpectedly, leaving the landscape bare. Morasquez, the second mate, had heard that their cities stood on gigantic trees, high overhead; each forest a city, high in the sky. They wore their hair in one long black rope, that hung down their back; and when their fathers died, they mourned in yellow. But here he was corrected by Garcia, another of the officers. It was the Chineses of Cathay that wore the pigtails and



## DAY OF Ship's Talk. FORTUNA

mourned in yellow. The Biminians mourned in black, like Christians. And this led to the question of their religion. One said that they worshipped fire, and one that they worshipped their own souls. And yet another had known a monk at Cadiz, who said that they were Nestorians, worse than any Jews or Moslems.

"Thou art wrong," said Cucheres, the captain of the pikemen. "I met an Indian at Hispaniola whose brother was once wrecked on their coast; and therefore I know for certain what they worship. They have as their goddess a terrific flower—a sort of Venus's fly-trap—which is so gigantic that it can eat a man with as much ease as ours can eat a fly; and they feed it with a slave once a day."

"The thing may be," said Sanchez, the one he had interrupted, "for things as strange have been known. But, on the whole, it is more likely that they are Nestorians, or heretics of some sort. This much is clear, that whatever their faith may be, it must be rooted out, as is being done in Guatemala. They use blood-

## The Romance of the Fountain

hounds there. Balboa has them trained with figures in human shape made of wicker and filled with carrion. Each hound is entered on the army list, and gets a soldier's pay. Balboa says that if the Indians can now understand the doctrine of the Trinity, it is thanks to those hounds of his. He calls them his confessors."

"Pity we can't use them at home to teach the Moors their prayers," said a soldier of the name of Carpaza; "a year or two, and they would be good Christians. What say'st thou, Sanchez?"

"Ay," answered the one so addressed, "a pity indeed. The King is too soft-hearted. He should have rooted their cursed religion out of Spain when he and Queen Isabel took Granada."

As he spoke, the cabin door opened, and the cynical face of Diego Perez appeared in its shadow.

"Talking of the Moslem?" he asked.

## Ship's Talk

"Yes, and how to treat them," answered Morasquez.

"Shall I tell you?" said the Chief Captain. "I've had some little experience of the Infidels; and I've never told you of the bonfire I set blazing in the Arabian Sea when I served the Portuguese under Vasco."

They all gathered round him.

"We had rounded the Cape of Storms," Perez began, "right away to Muscat and the coast of Ind. And we had bombarded town after town along the coasts, filling up our ships with pillage as no ships were ever filled before; crazing every turbaned head with an unknown thunder, till every gemmed and sooty Sultan trembled in his yellow shoes, from Gomorro to Ganza.

"One day we sighted a Moslem sail, and pounced upon it like a hawk on the quarry. They turned out to be pilgrims bound for Mecca, sailing slowly in a large and heavy vessel. They were as crowded as nestling

## The Romance of the Fountain

insects. Vasco cried out: 'I know their turbans. They're Arab vermin, every one. We must board her.'

"But it was no easy matter, for every devil of them fought for his life like a dozen. However, when it came to the end, not a man was left alive. Vasco saw to that.

"But the women and children still remained on the ship, waiting the Admiral's pleasure. And Vasco said: 'I've no room for the women; but we can keep and christen twenty of the children.' And he bade me select them before nightfall. So I took a boat and chose twenty little Arabs, and packed them in it tight. And as I was about to leave the ship and row back to my own, I debated in my mind whether to fire her or let her float. Better fire her, I thought; she'll serve to light us back. If any of the women find it hot, they can jump into the sea. So I lit a fuse, and threw it into the dry tackle, where the rising night breeze fanned it gently, and we rowed away.

## Ship's Talk

"When we had got to a safe distance, we lay on our oars where the ship, when she should settle, could not suck us down with her; and there in the gathering night we waited.

"Suddenly a pinnacle of fire shot up dazzling white from the sea to the sky. Then all grew red, and for miles the water round the ship grew lurid and as vivid as day.

"As we sat and watched in the ever-increasing radiance, we saw something come swimming from the flaming ship—something that might be man, or might be beast. Glowing ashes were sputtering round it, like a rain of bright-red blood; by glimpses we could see its head struggling towards us through a quarter of a mile of crimson water. Then we saw that it was a woman carrying a child on her back. How we laughed! 'By the Gospel,' we said, 'it's another little Moslem to baptize: its mother is bringing it herself. . . .' We could see the little head by the side of the big one,

## The Romance of the Fountain

bobbing, bobbing, bobbing : it was the funniest thing in the world. And as we laughed we shouted, 'Swim and save it from damnation ! Well swum, well swum !' And as we watched her we betted on her progress, wondering whether she would reach us or not. We could see that she was getting more exhausted every minute. But, by the Lord ! she managed to get to us, while her gurgling shouts grew wilder and wilder, beseeching us in her lingo to save her little infidel. So we took it from her as she grappled to the gunwale ; and I rolled her back into the sea with a handspike in her throat."

A man had entered the cabin unnoticed, in time to hear the end of the story.

"Thou art a base coward," he said, for all to hear.

"Ha, what's that ?" cried the other. "Say it again——"

"Thou art a vile, base coward," repeated the newcomer.

## Ship's Talk

Like a tiger that gathers itself up, Diego Perez sprang at him with his dagger.

"Take that!" he cried.

But Juan de Alvareda—for he it was—was no less quick. He caught his assailant's wrist, and averted the blow as it fell. Then they rolled together on the floor, over and over. In another moment Juan had wrenched the weapon out of the other's hand, and was holding it at his throat.

"Shall I drive it in?" he panted. "There, keep thy dog's life; I make thee a present of it. But stick no more handspikes in women's throats."

And the others, recovering from the suddenness of the brawl, separated the two.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE WATER IN THE TANKS

ANOTHER day had gone by. The Commander, as we must now call Don Luis, was walking up and down his cabin, stopping every now and then to gaze wistfully through the port-hole at the heavens and the sea. At last, at last, the fixed complexion of the sky was giving way. There were omens of a change. And well indeed there might. It was the twentieth day of the calm. He had begun to think that the vessel, planted in stagnant brine, had struck root, and was tethered for ever to that one spot of sea. Oh, with what thirst, during those three weeks of waiting,



## The Water in the Tanks

had he panted!—Not for the base and unvivifying water for which the others were yearning; but for the magic rill, the trickling diamond, that was his constant thought by day and by night. Did not each fretful hour of new delay and of baffled expectation, that trifled with the vast longing of his heart, add threads of silver to his rapidly-whitening beard? Last night there had been a change in the aspect of the moon. The catspaw was at hand. The wind would rise to-night, and then they would unfurl the sails once more.

As he turned from the port-hole and resumed his walk, his face had again the light of mystic hope upon it. Then his brow contracted, as a thought struck him. What about Fernandez' ship and the other? His mind misgave him at their disappearance. It was nearly a month since they had parted company. What if Fernandez were to reach the goal before himself, and, being the first to land, should

## The Romance of the Fountain

make a private treaty with the immortal king? He thought him treacherous enough for that.

There was a knock at the door, and Diego Perez entered.

"There is a change," said his chief.

"I know it," answered the lieutenant with a grim smile. "Have I not had my eyes fastened for half the night on the moon and on the faint vapours that have formed on the horizon? Yes, there's a change. I have already given all the necessary orders. The men are ready; and within twelve hours we shall be able to unfurl the sails to the wind and turn the helm . . . back upon Hispaniola."

"Hell and thunder!" cried the Commander, with a start that upset the maps and instruments on the table. "What dost thou mean?"

"I mean," said Diego with a sinister composure, "that there is water enough in the tanks—and that barely—to take us back

## The Water in the Tanks

to Hispaniola; but not half the quantity that is needed to take us to our destination."

Don Luis's face was as white as the papers that littered the table.

"Say it slower," he said in a stiff, soundless voice; "say it again. Say I have heard thee wrong. It cannot be. O God, it cannot be! Say thou didst not say to me 'Turn back.'"

"It is not I who say it," said the other, "but the tanks. Come and inspect them for yourself."

"Back to Hispaniola for the want of a few paltry gallons of fresh water? It cannot be. The thought is mad and monstrous. Why, it would mean at least a year of wasted plans, of wasted effort. What am I saying? Why, it would mean the end of the whole enterprise. For who would get this mutinous crew to sail again? I say it cannot be. It is a nightmare of thy dreaming. . . . And while we turn our backs upon the priceless goal, Fernandez, with

## The Romance of the Fountain

the other ships, will reach it, and I shall be cheated of the object of my life."

"There is no arguing with parched and cracking throats," answered Perez. "Do you think you can quench a sailor's raging thirst by talking of the Fount of Youth? Come and inspect the tanks."

The Commander passed his hand across his white brow and drawn face.

"It may rain," he said. "The clouds are gathering on the horizon."

But the Chief Captain shook his head with an ugly laugh.

"I know these seas," he retorted. "Have I not sailed them before at this season? The wind is at hand, but not a drop of rain."

The other strode up and down the cabin.

"What!" he cried, and his voice broke into a sob, "to be cheated of the Fount of Founts, of that potent and ineffable draught, for the lack of some few gallons of such water as any dog can lap in the street? The thought will

## The Water in the Tanks

drive me mad. Rather than turn, I'll blow up the ship and all it contains, and my own self with it."

"The thought is very kind," said his lieutenant with another and louder laugh, more insolent than before; "but as it happens that the crew, and I myself, have no such violent objection to reach old age as you have, I must beg you to put your powder to some other use than sending us to Heaven. I have told you how matters stand. The case is very simple. You have but to compute the gallons and compute the mouths."

He paused; then fixing his eyes on his chief:

"There are ways, however, of cutting Gordian knots," he said, "which only old adventurers of the sea like myself know of and can practise. . . ."

Don Luis started, and his breath stopped, as he hung on the other's words.

"Now listen," Perez went on, his words

## The Romance of the Fountain

dropping slowly one by one. "What would you give me if, despite the ebbing tanks, I were to lead you to your goal? Weigh well your answer."

"All save my own life," answered the Commander; "all that I have and love."

"Even the promise of your daughter's hand in marriage?"

"Yes, even that," he said huskily.

"Well, if you give me that," said the other, "and put me for twelve hours in undisputed power on this ship, I take you to Bimini. Do you swear?"

"I swear it by the shrine of Compostella. I know of nothing more sacred."

"I am satisfied," said Perez. "We understand each other. And now I will leave you to your meditations for a little, while I give my orders. I would rather you remained below. I shall not be long."

And, saluting his superior, who had now become his subordinate, he left the cabin.

## The Water in the Tanks

Don Luis's eyes followed him as he disappeared; then he clutched the edge of the table, as though to steady himself. Was it a sudden stagger that had left him dizzy? or was it only that his soul had stood for a few black and icy minutes, shivering in the outer lobby of Despair, and still felt numb, even by the rekindled hearth of Hope?

He shook himself, and in his soul two voices sounded simultaneously, one loud and triumphant, the other fainter but persistent. "The Fount of Youth!" cried the one; "thou hast the Fount of Youth. Exult! Exult!" "Thou hast sold her," cried the other. "Thou hast sold her!"

"Exult! Exult!" the first voice cried again. "Who says thou hast sold her? Have not others, for baser goals, to crush out love and conscience, mercy, happiness, health and slumber—and all for a base god? And dost thou think that Youth, the Radiant, the Wondrous, will grant at less price the glory of

## The Romance of the Fountain

his Fountain? Price? Did I say price? Who talks of price, when what is sought is the ineffable? Is it not for her, for the child herself, that thou seekest the incomparable boon? Is it not that perennial youth may sit on her cheek, that it may gleam in her eye, that thou confrontest all these dangers? Away with the base thoughts that assail thee! Away with these human compunctions! There can be but exultation at her glory, delight at her ineffable fortune. Exult! Exult! Thy daughter will be as beautiful for ever!"

And the second voice sounded no more.

Presently Diego Perez returned, and cut short the rush of his thoughts.

"Already back?" said Don Luis. "What orders hast thou given in this half-hour of thy omnipotence?"

"I will tell you," answered the Chief Captain. "For these last two moonlit nights the sailors have been watching a phantom island on the distant horizon. It is a thing



## The Water in the Tanks

of unsubstantial haze and vapour—a freak of light betokening a change of weather. I have ordered a third of the men, under the charge of a man called Juan—one of those we recruited at Hispaniola—to leave the ship in two boats, and await us there.”

“What, in a phantom island!” cried the other. “Art thou mad?”

“Then, while they land upon it,” went on Perez, without heeding the interruption, “we sail on. The crew, diminished by so many mouths, and put on half rations of fresh water, can reach Bimini in safety.”

“But, good God!” exclaimed the Commander, his worn and pinched expression changing to one of horror, “why, this is simple murder. What! send out a third of the men in open boats on this unsailed ocean to die of thirst, or drink of the brine that maddens! It is murder, simple murder!”

“If they only think sufficiently hard on sugar, the brine won’t taste of salt.”

## The Romance of the Fountain

"It can't be done," said Don Luis in an appalled voice; "I can't let such a monstrous thing be done."

"The thing, monstrous or not, is done already," answered Perez.

"Christ in Heaven!" cried the other.

"The thing is done already," Perez repeated. "They have left, and are now past recall. Didn't you give me power of life and death upon this ship? I can now take you to Bimini, —in return for the honour of your daughter's hand."

"O Fountain of Youth," cried Don Luis, covering his face with his hands, "what hast thou made me do?"

The Chief Captain looked at him with a contemptuous smile.

"And so I turn his vanities to my profit," he thought, "even as I shall do many a time in future. I will build up my house on the misty basis of his dreams,—the solid edifice of my real power. While he is seeking the Fount of

## The Water in the Tanks

Youth, I will make the regions we conquer mine. He has got a royal charter in his pocket. But I, when once I am his son-in-law, will be the real Viceroy, the master of the substance, until such time as feeling strong enough to do it, I shall deprive him even of the shadow of his authority."

"O Fountain of Youth," cried Don Luis once more, "what hast thou made me do?"

## CHAPTER XII

### THE FLOWER

MEANWHILE, in the mysterious kingdom of Bimini, dusky myriads, unconscious of the impending arrival of the strange steel-capped, steel-breasted men with the white faces, who were to shake the air with a new thunder, were living their daily swarming life, even as they had done for ages and ages, round the great fane of a terrific and wonderful goddess.

It was an immense cave temple, carved out of the living rock in the dim centuries of their antiquity; at once the centre and the symbol of their civilisation. Its heavy vaults and jointless walls, crushing to the spirit as no others in the world, were covered with

## The Flower

dreadful pictures of the minor but not less terrible divinities, powers, and demons, that presided over the destinies of the race. To an unknown depth, back into the rock, stretched those mighty caves and their endless lines of thickset pillars, and under them the deeper crypts where the hidden rites of a dreadful religion were practised, and where the captives of war and the doomed slaves of peace were kept for constant sacrifice. In the central fane of the temple dwelt the blood-stained goddess, whose bosom, when man was pressed against it, meant death most horrible; whose loveliness was not human; whose limbs were not limbs of woman—the Virgin Deity of Beauty and Destruction, whom her worshippers called the Flower of Cruelty, the Scented Throttler, the Wondrous Executioner of Nature.

Terrific?

She was more terrific than the great brazen Moloch whose hands raised the infants of

## The Romance of the Fountain

Carthage to his lipless metal mouth and impassibly dropped them into his fiery maw.

Pitiless?

She was more pitiless than the brass bull of Phalaris, in whom bellowed the shadows that loomed through his red-hot flanks.

Inscrutable?

She was more inscrutable than the silent Iron Virgin whose arms, lined with rows of knives, closed on the captive in the mediæval dungeon, as he poured his prayers unsuspectingly into her bosom.

Yea, and she was more monstrous than them all, because of her infinite beauty.

She had once dwelt in the hot primeval forest, ages and ages ago, before man had ever knelt to her splendour or felt her hug of horror, and when the blood that flecked her snowy petals was not yet his own. In those days a rippling streamlet ran through her grove with a never-ceasing murmur. All the loveliness of Nature surrounded her shrine; ay, and all

## The Flower

Nature's cruelty ; and she was the goddess of the one and of the other. Great lianas, flowering for the wild bee and the humming-bird, who passed over her like a flash of gold or of azure, hung in festoons from tree to tree, where her heavy odours were distilled in the noontide. The gaudy parrots clung to the swinging garlands that enclosed her. Flower and flaming feather vied in gorgeousness all about her ; while the panther, with a boundless hunger in his eyes, circled slowly and soundlessly round her, warned by an instinct to approach no nearer. Sometimes the lazy current of the great constrictor would wind almost at her feet, —the great constrictor, once her rival, but whom she had long since surpassed in the art of squeezing out the life in a silent irresistible vice.

Human flesh had never fed her ; nor as yet had man learnt to fear her. Only if some drowsy deer incautiously took its noonday sleep within her reach, would her mighty tendrils creep round it, draw it nearer and nearer, and

## The Romance of the Fountain

slowly squeeze out its convulsed and writhing life in a flowery chasm; or she would seize some blue-faced ape with her ineluctable thongs, or some guileless cockatoo would fly straight into her bosom.

But at last man came within her reach; and the great terrific Flower, luring him by her beauty, drowsing him by her narcotic scents, drew him to her feet. Her resistless tentacles grasped him, and his head sank on the horror of her breast in an appalling embrace.

Then her appetite for human flesh began; and man brought her of his best; feeding her with the limbs of his own kind; giving her worship and hymns and slave upon slave, victim upon victim, while he watched her tendrils crush the breath from the body, and make the body into pulp.

And at length, having made her his goddess, he placed her in the temple of Beauty and Destruction, and fed her daily with a slave.



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE LANDING OF THE WHITES

DON LUIS's ship, enabled by Perez' stratagem to proceed on its way in spite of the exhausted supply of fresh water in its tanks, made rapid progress towards its goal; caught up its consorts, and at last, on a glorious evening, as the sun, who had led them westwards for so long, was sinking in all his splendour, as if leaving them on the fulfilment of his task, sighted the long wooded shores of the mysterious land. A little later, the leader of the expedition, springing on to the yellow sandy beach, unfurled the standard of Aragon, and bade the whole of his little army kneel

## The Romance of the Fountain

round it while he rendered thanks for the fulfilment of the dream of a lifetime.

"Soldiers of Youth," he said, rising from his prayer to address them, "never before in the history of Spain and of the world have brave men landed on a foreign strand upon so wonderful, so incredibly glorious an errand as yours. For it is not gold, nor silver, nor gems—though doubtless we shall find those too—that you come to conquer in these untrodden regions, but something infinitely more precious; something in exchange for which the possessors of all the doubloons ever coined, of all the jewels ever cut, would have thrown them with scorn into the ocean. You are here to find that ineffable Fount, that bubbling, rippling Diamond, that men have seen in tantalising dreams through centuries of hope and fear, and that the world has thirsted for till now with the thirst of thirsts, the yearning of yearnings. If we find what we seek—what we will die rather than lose—

## The Landing of the Whites

those of you who are still young this day will keep their youth for ever; and those of you who are old will look into each others' faces and know each other not: for youth will sit upon their brows radiant and victorious. But I would not have you fancy that the enterprise is easy: that you have only to stretch your hand to grasp the unspeakable boon. Like all glorious exploits—nay, more than all others—it will require your courage, your patience, your devotion, your determination to conquer or to die. The Fount is protected by impenetrable forests and by innumerable warriors. But, Soldiers of Youth, you will overcome both. I have sworn to King Ferdinand to bring him back the Draught of Draughts, and with God's help I will do it."

A deafening shout of assent greeted the Commander's speech; though whether the prospect of miraculous rejuvenescence had as much share in the men's enthusiasm as the

## The Romance of the Fountain

allusion to the gold and the jewels, is a question that must remain more than doubtful.

By a lucky accident, the point of the coast where they had cast anchor lay in a province which had but recently been conquered and added to the dominion of Bimini, and whose people had just risen in rebellion. Scarce had the little Spanish force landed, when dark masses of armed natives were seen approaching, who, so far from attacking it, showed every sign of amity, and welcomed the unknown invaders with open arms, almost as if they had been expecting them. Gifts were exchanged, and Don Luis found his effective augmented, far sooner than he could have hoped, by a strong auxiliary force of warlike Indians,—tribes as brave as the Biminians who had conquered them, and admirably fitted, under European leadership, for the sort of war he had to wage.

Though uniting the courage inherited from a long line of warlike ancestors with the

## The Landing of the Whites

fearlessness of a fanatic, the leader of the expedition had little of the special capacity required for military command. But he possessed in the person of Diego Perez one of those terrible instruments of conquest of which Spain furnished so many in that century,—men who united baseness and bravery, greed and military genius, cruelty and indomitable will. And well it was for the Spaniards that they were so commanded; for the interval that was granted them was short. They had scarcely had time to rest from the dangers and fatigues of the sea, when all the forces of Bimini burst upon their auxiliaries and themselves. A detailed account of the Biminian campaign does not fall within the scope of this book, and is not required to develop the romance of the Fountain. Suffice it to say that, blow upon blow, victory upon victory, the army of the Dreamer fought its way against fearful numerical odds through the plain that lay

## The Romance of the Fountain

between the coast and the capital—even as some of the men who composed it were destined to do on a larger scale, not many years later, in the realms of the Aztec kings and the Incas. For what swarms of dusky warriors, though as thick as the stars in the sky, could stand against those terrible pike and crossbowmen who had learnt their trade in the campaigns of Granada, or in Italy under the great Gonsalvo, and who were supported by the irresistible fire-spitting tubes that shook the air like the crashes of storm?

Not only did the fire-arms of the invaders reach them before they could get within striking distance, but the poisoned arrows so effective against the naked bodies of men of their own dark race, glanced off the bright steel plates of the Spaniards, or were cleaned of their venom by the very leather they pierced through. Thus it was the Indian auxiliaries who, unprotected by armour or buff coat, furnished the contingent of death. Their

## The Landing of the Whites

losses mattered little : their ranks were renewed as quickly as they fell ; and the white men marched on, as if they had borne a charmed life, to deal the decisive blow when the Biminians had exhausted their arrows, and had to fight hand to hand with the javelin.

Don Luis's original plan had been to gain possession of the person of the Ever-Young monarch, and then to exact the secret of the Fountain as his ransom. But though the Indian King lost battle on battle, and had to fall back step by step on his capital, he had not, so far, fallen into the hands of the invader ; and the mystic Seeker of Youth was forced to change his plan, and to trust to negotiation and treaty for the fulfilment of his hopes. So, when almost within sight of the mysterious temple city, he stopped suddenly on his onward march, and accepted proposals of truce. And very welcome was the pause, for the army urgently needed repose.

## CHAPTER XIV

### SUSPENSE

A MORE stable encampment than had yet been possible was established on the margin of the primeval forest along whose side the road of the army lay. It was as beautiful and restful a spot as had ever been selected for a camp. The tents in their symmetrical rows were shaded by trees of uncomputed age, and a sound of cooling streamlets pervaded the little canvas city. But Rosita, as the weeks went by, though she profited by the physical rest after the interminable march, during which she had followed the army in a litter, found no peace for her soul. She had been told that the lost boats had been picked up,



## Suspense

and that part of their crews had been found still alive. But she could not find out whether Juan was among them, nor dared she enquire with too great an insistence for fear of awaking suspicion. The secret of the fool's errand on which they had been sent was known only to her father and to Diego Perez. Rosita suspected the truth, and in her agony at Juan's loss, had taxed her father with the deed; but he had opposed to the charge an obstinate denial. For the moment all communication with the ships and the landing-place was cut off; and she ate away her heart in uncertainty. The Spaniards had brought but few white women with them, and of these all but herself had remained on the ships. For her father had forced her to accompany the army, that she might share the first glorious draught. She was given an Indian guard and a number of Indian girls as attendants, with whom she wandered aimlessly in the forest within sound of the camp bugles.

## The Romance of the Fountain

Meanwhile, her position was becoming more and more intolerable. For Perez now made no secret of his pretensions; and though he seemed to be in no great hurry to exact the fulfilment of the promise that her father had made him, she found it every day more difficult to keep him at a distance. Her instinctive loathing for the man grew in intensity the more he forced his company upon her. As Chief Captain, he shared her father's table, and Rosita was daily obliged to endure the insolent familiarity with which he now treated his patron and superior, the covered contempt he bestowed on him, and the yet more insolent attentions which he paid to herself. Don Luis knew but too well how entirely he was in Perez's hands, and how absolutely the realisation of his hopes depended on his lieutenant's experience and military capacity; and though every now and again a flame of hereditary pride or of natural anger would blaze out when his base-born subordinate had gone a

## Suspense

step too far, he was on the whole hopelessly submissive. The more the inner voice which he had stifled insisted on making itself heard, and the more it reproached him with the sacrifice of his daughter, the more obstinately he tried to persuade himself that the whole expedition had really been planned for her sake, and that the immortalising of her youth and rare beauty was the only goal of his life.

"Take him as a husband?" she said to her father one day; "not while life is in my body!"

"You will change your mind when you know him better, Rosita," he answered. "Remember, in this perilous enterprise I may be cut off at any moment, cut off before reaching the goal. And would you have me die with the knowledge that I had not provided for your safety; that I had left you with no protector in a camp of men like these?"

"Never, never!" she repeated. "I would rather mate with the tiger of the forest. I

## The Romance of the Fountain

would rather be protected by the rattle-snake and the cobra."

"You misjudge him," he said.

"I have taken his measure," she retorted.

"In this world," her father went on, "every great prize must be paid for; and if an unspeakable glory requires as its price——"

She stopped him with a look that his eyes could not meet.

"Price?" she cried. "Price? Then you admit——"

"I admit nothing," he answered, as he turned his back upon her. "You are as wilful as you are blind to your own immense opportunity. Think it over, and come to your senses."

Sometimes Rosita succeeded in escaping from the guard which her father insisted on, and would make her way by herself into the forest. But such occasions were rare. Then she would sit by herself at the root of some gigantic tree of unknown name, weaving the dull imaginings of uncertain evil, and accusing herself of all

## Suspense

that had happened. Why had she insisted on sharing her father's folly, and accompanied him across the dreadful ocean to this horrible land, when Juan had implored her to elope? Why had she brought danger and suffering and perhaps death upon the man she loved, and all this fear and all this misery upon herself? How right Juan had been in his forecast of misfortune! Oh, if only she had let him persuade her, and had fled with him when he had urged her to do so! Danger? Suffering? Oh, there could be but one end to it all, and that was surely death, for her father, for her lover, for herself. But, no, she could not have acted differently. She must not let her soul regret the step she had taken. She had done but her duty, and must fight out her fate.

If only she knew if he was one of the men saved. But how to find out, even if communications with the ships were open? In whom could she confide? To whom could she give the com-

## The Romance of the Fountain

mission? And even were he safe from the perils of Nature, safe from the sea and the chances of battle; even were he here in the camp, would he not be in hourly danger of death? Would he not be exposed to the implacable hatred and treachery of Perez—things more dangerous than the arrows of the Indians, than the fever of the swamps?

And, loathing her surroundings, she would go over and over again with cruel vividness the old days in Spain, when she had waited in a wood of other trees and other mosses, where Juan would show her the way to the trysting-place by means of little signs cut in the smooth bark.

But one morning, as she so sat, and looked round her with a bitter smile of contrast, her heart suddenly stopped in her bosom and thumped at its walls as never before: for lo! on the tree in front of her, she saw that same familiar sign fresh cut in the unfamiliar bark.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE MEN IN THE BOATS

AND now let us revert to the men who had been sent out in open boats to die on an unsailed ocean.

It is an old story, as old as navigation itself; a story that you can read in the records of every seafaring people and in every language; in every book of maritime adventure, and in every history of discovery; in the yellow folio of some past century, and in the newspaper of yesterday;—a story that is being enacted on some ocean or other at the very moment that you are reading this page. Perhaps Odysseus and his men, when they had left the Pillars of Hercules far behind them, to disappear for

## The Romance of the Fountain

ever from the world and its history in the mists of the Atlantic, enacted it as it will be enacted next month by men who will look into each other's faces with the old terrible surmise, as the Sky says to them: "For you I have no rain"; and the Sun asks them: "Why drink ye not the brine? Is it not water?" and the Sea calls out to them in the silence: "For you I have no shores. Come, leap into my bosom. On my surface there are no ships to save you, and in my depths there is no madness, only death."

Through the endless hours they rowed, while the great sun crossed the heavens above them with snail-like slowness, and the island that should have been upon the sea-line seemed to have sunk into the deep. And then the moon rose; and lo! the island was there: there as distinct as their own faces. And again they rowed on with their strength renewed by hope and the coolness of night; and the island retreated before them; and at dawn it had



## The Men in the Boats

again disappeared. And on and on, with the scorching inexorable sun once more above their heads, while the little fresh water they had brought with them dwindled hour by hour. And they knew that there was no help upon the sea.

And their thirst grew and grew.

The ship had long since disappeared, none knew in what direction. And on the third morning, when Juan and his men looked round, their companion boat was gone too.

And another great sun rose and crawled through the sky above them. And their thirst still grew and grew and grew. Juan ordered the men to dip their limbs in turn in the water, and let the skin absorb it, by which their thirst was diminished. And if any of them were saved, it was certainly owing to the expedient. But when one of the men, and then a second, had been pulled into the sea by a black rolling shadow that eternally followed the boat, and a red ring had bubbled up where the man had

## The Romance of the Fountain

disappeared, it had to be abandoned. Then hunger came and joined in the game. Their only hope lay in the ship's returning to seek for them; but in vain their eyes grew sore with sweeping the horizon. Then Juan saw the look in their faces change, and began to see the strong looking at the weak with an ugly pertinacity. And suddenly one of the men began to sing a high, hysterical song, and plunged over the stern and was seen no more. And Juan watched one of them whose eyes were fixed with horrible intentness on his neighbour, and saw something that the others did not see—something that told him that the hour of the vampire was come. And drawing his knife, he killed the man then and there, and threw him overboard. And the others looked on with indifference; but one muttered that he should have kept him for food.

And then began the stage in which none dare sleep, lest sleep should invite lethargy or murder—a stage in which Juan still maintained

## The Men in the Boats

some control; knowing well that the moment when his power over the men should cease, would be the signal for the last saturnalia of horror.

And at last the rescuing ship was seen on the horizon. But it was not that of Don Luis. It was its consort, that of Fernandez, which had parted company with it before the great becalming. And what men were still alive were lifted into it in their helplessness and their delirium; and Juan was one of them. But it was a long while before he recovered sufficient strength to join the force that was fighting in the interior of the country and find his way to the camp.

## CHAPTER XVI

### RENDEZVOUS IN THE FOREST

JUAN and Rosita were resting on the moss in the virgin forest at some little distance from the Spanish tents. Above them were depths of green—bough upon bough, and yet more boughs above those. The tapering lichen-patched columns of the trees, soaring up and dividing, over-curved the gloom with ever lighter, ever more delicate arches, tier upon tier ; while the yellow sunlight, filtering through, grew ever greener, till it found the moss on which the two were lying. The beryl dome which shrined their love might have been some rare ocean cave, in whose green lights and shadows during the glare of noon, the scaly

## Rendezvous in the Forest

and fantastic denizens of the deep, the ever-escaping rapid Nereids and the enamoured Tritons that pursue them, seek refuge when the sun's darts strike most searchingly home. Or was it all a dream, Juan thought; and he called on her to assure him that the leaves were real, and not the tantalising vision born of raging thirst and the delirium of that open boat on the leafless horror of the sea, where he had lain among the dead and dying; and that she, who seemed to be leaning over him, was not a phantom of that last awful hour, before Fernandez's ship had picked up himself and his mates, and taken them on to Bimini.

"Dear, dismiss your fears," said Rosita, the smile of a sudden fancy breaking on her lips. "You are no longer lying in the open boat, dying of thirst; nor yet are you on land. These are the green silent depths of the sea, far below the cruel surface where reigns the sea's mischief; and I am one of the mermaids bending over you. When some comely young

## The Romance of the Fountain

sailor is drowned, we catch his body as it sinks through the fathoms of green water, and we wake him back with our spells and our kisses to a deep-sea life."

"The Queen of the Mermaids," he said, smiling in answer to her smile; "you must not conceal your rank."

And as he looked at her face, the thought struck him, that had she been indeed a mermaid, she would have been so much more beautiful than the others, that she could only have been their sovereign or their victim; and the sea would have grown greener with jealousy.

"No; here in the sea-weed forests we are all equal," Rosita said; "and no discord or spite or envy ever disturbs the calm green depths. Sweet sailor, by-and-by I will take you through the treasures of the Ocean, and show you the caves where we keep the sunken gold and all the shipwrecked gems of the world. There you will see coins minted by forgotten kings; sceptres of unremembered

## Rendezvous in the Forest

empires; bar gold stored for unrealised conquest; ingots that skeleton hands laid in tribute at skeleton feet. There you will see rubies that have dropped from the sunrise, topazes that Evening has unstrung from her necklace, and scattered broadcast on the sea; pearls that are made of the white gleamings of the clouds. I will show you the lost galleys of sea-demigods; the argosies that were laden with hope and with gems; the argosies that sailed into the fairy future and never returned."

"And the richest of the treasures is in a certain mermaid's heart," he said.

"We will live here together for ever," she went on, continuing her fancy, "and see no more of the earth, save some rare glimpse, when we swim up and sit on some rock, where, while I sing to my golden harp, or while we watch some lazy ship in the sunset, you will repeat the merman vows that you made me. Come, what will you say?"

## The Romance of the Fountain

He might have told her that the pale green light, which shines so softly in the happy depths, was less to him than her love; that the slender stems that wave for ever in the deep sea-caverns, were less supple than her form; that the pale rosy lining of the ocean shells was dulled by the freshness of her cheek, the coral by the crimson of her lips. He might have told her that her voice was sweeter than the ocean's summer breeze; that her kiss was softer than that of the sea-gull's wing on the wave. All this was in the fashion of their day. But he answered simply: "Ah, Rosita, if only it were possible!"

Again they looked up through the depths of green. It was sweet to carry out the fancy.

"We would swim together," he said, "through the old sea-cities that the ocean hides in its heart—the old sea-cities whence, ever and anon, the sound of bells rises up suddenly for the belated fisherman in the



## Rendezvous in the Forest

twilight. There, where the hurry of life has ended, we would swim hand in hand through the empty halls, in and out between the slimy columns, where the wonderful blooms of the sea make living tapestries for dead kings' palaces, and the shells make mosaics for no human feet to tread: till we reached the throne-room of Ocean. There I would crown you queen. Ay, it is better to be merman and mermaid."

"I would not be a daughter of earth," she said slowly; "earth is too full of care. I would not leave my happy mermaid life."

"But if I were human," he said, "would you not forsake the sea to live with me on land, and share with me the pain and the care, the wistfulness, the regret?"

"The caves of Ocean," she answered, "are green and are sweet; the leaves of the sea-weed forests fall not in autumn. But the streets of your towns are paved with cares; your houses are all tiled with woes; the bitter bread that

## The Romance of the Fountain

men eat there is made of grain that Sorrow sows while they sleep."

"And you would sit on your rock," he said reproachfully, "and watch the passing ships, while the thought of me faded from your heart, even as the sails faded in the distance?"

"Love," she cried, throwing her arms round him, "I would leave a thousand caves, a thousand golden seas, to tread by your side the earth's dusty paths, and share with you their miserable burdens."

"And we are together upon earth," he said—"cruelly upon earth. O love, it is time to wake from the day-dream that has cheated us both, here where the sound of your voice, mixed with the whisper of the leaves, had lulled my soul till I had half-forgotten what brought me. Awake, awake, Emergency is clamouring for an answer, and peril wraps us round like a fiery girdle."

She looked at him pleadingly.

"Oh, Juan," she murmured, "I was so happy

## Rendezvous in the Forest

in my dream. May we not be a little longer merman and mermaid in the pale green sunlight, where the world with all its trouble, its doubts, its hatreds, has no existence for us?"

"Would it were possible!" he answered. "But danger presses. We must think and act."

"You exaggerate the danger."

"I am no craven," he said, "for whom every mole-hill shows the shadow of a toppling mountain. But an urgent peril threatens us—Diego Perez——"

"I am not afraid of him," said Rosita.

"You don't know him," Juan went on. "The most destructive wild beast that crouches in these forests is kind compared with his ferocity, and loyal when measured with his treachery. He is your father's favourite and his tyrant; his daily evil genius; and your father, for some mysterious service past or future, has promised him your hand. And

## The Romance of the Fountain

he is beginning to press for the fulfilment of the bond."

"He will find that he wastes his pains," said the girl.

"And when he does, and drops the mask," replied Juan, "the mask of love and courtship, woe to yourself and to me. His soul writhes under your scorn, and when fair means have failed, he will use foul."

"I can defend myself," she said; "his violence does not frighten me."

"You don't know the danger you are in," Juan rejoined. "If he were not the mean, cruel coward, the unopposed tyrant that he is—if I could cross blades with him in fair fight, I would rid you of him soon enough. But if I challenged him, do you suppose he would meet me? Before the day was out, I should only have got myself throttled for my pains. Listen. His insolence has bred discontent among the soldiers, whose lives are being wasted in a vain, empty enterprise.

## Rendezvous in the Forest

Cucheres, Garcia, Morasquez, and some others, have formed a plan to desert suddenly, seize one of the ships, and sail back to Spain. We must escape."

"I cannot leave my father," said Rosita.

"Your life depends on it," Juan went on. "As for me, I owe your father nothing. Did he not place me with others in an open boat, to die of thirst on an unsailed ocean?"

"But I," said Rosita, "I owe him all—my very breath, and many a kiss between the eyes of childhood, when he used to hold me on his knee, and when the Fount of Youth was not, as it is now, the only thing he loved."

Juan's brow darkened.

"Don't mention that hideous unreality," he cried. "In his mad thirst for the enchanted water that he will never reach on earth, he plunges all who depend on him in ruin, and will drag you into destruction with himself."

"The greater need," she answered, "that I,

## The Romance of the Fountain

who am the only true friend that remains, should not desert him. Love, it cannot be."

"It must, it must!" urged her lover. "There is no time to lose. This opportunity once missed, will never recur."

"I cannot leave my father," she said. "I cannot leave him, even for you."

The faint sound of a clarion reached them from the camp as she spoke.

"We must back to the tents," she cried, springing to her feet—"back by different ways. Hasten, hasten, or you'll be missed. Every kiss is a danger."

"We shall meet again to-morrow," he said, turning reluctantly to go. "And I shall break your purpose. Your life depends on it."

Rosita looked after him with anguish in her eyes. Love was putting duty to the torture. Would it stand the dreadful test? It would have to, she thought. But oh, it would have been sweet to fly with him back to Spain! to see no more this wild and cruel Indian world

## Rendezvous in the Forest

of peril ; and with her hand in his, once more to cross the rippling corn-fields where they used to meet. But it could not be. She could not abandon her father to his fate. No, no, it could not be. She must stay beside him to the end.

## CHAPTER XVII

### MEETING OF FOES

IN their clandestine relations, Juan and Rosita had but two preoccupations. Since the very first dawn of their love they had kept in view two things, and two only—the hereditary feud that divided their families, and the great mad quest that had brought them where they were. They could see only the implacable hate that must needs lie in the heart of Don Luis for any one bearing the name of Alvareda, and his fanatical faith in the Fount. These two things seemed to sum up the whole situation and to govern the present and the future. But were they right to take it so completely for granted? The name of Alvareda had indeed played a



## Meeting of Foes

terrible part in his ancestor's lives, and one cruel enough in his own. Were there no other elements in his character that they might have remembered, no other motives to which to appeal? Were there no other strings in his soul than ancestral and personal hatred, than the all-sacrificing passion for the Fountain? Was there no generous impulse, no tender fatherly love, no sense of justice and reason? If these things were there, they could not see them in the light of the man's fierce monomania; nor did they suspect the struggles that might all the time be going on in his mystic irresolute heart.

If the Dreamer's dream was the cause of the dangers and trials that beset them in these wild lands of the West, it had at least the compensating quality that it made him singularly blind to their doings, and greatly facilitated their meeting. And so they grew a little careless regarding him.

Don Luis's visions were internal. He had seen, for example, the sparkling object of his life

## The Romance of the Fountain

—whether Elixir or Fountain—in innumerable shapes, each more dazzling than the last, with the inner eyes of the spirit. But he was not given to outer hallucinations. Yet one day he had had one; and singularly distinct it had been, though it was only a glimpse through the trees that surrounded the camp. He had seen, in all her youth and her beauty, the wife he had lost long, long years before. And with her—O intolerable sight!—was walking the man—he, too, in his youth—who had dared to love her, who had almost succeeded in snatching her out of his arms on his wedding day, and through years had heaped every wrong on the man he had outraged. For one brief instant the sight had staggered him. He had looked again, and it was gone. It must surely have been a passing fever of the brain.

He brooded over the incident. He asked himself whether the woman he had seen had not after all been Rosita—Rosita, who was so like what her mother had been at her age. But

## Meeting of Foes

the man? What man had the features of his enemy, such as his enemy had been years ago? No; it must have been a delusion of the overwrought senses, perhaps brought on by the work and the excitement of the campaign, by the near realisation of his hopes.

Then there came another day, some weeks later, when he again came on the couple: this time face to face. And now he saw her standing before him, Rosita his daughter—like her dead mother certainly, but yet how unlike! And a man had his arm round her shoulder: a man young and handsome, who might have been Alvareda of old, and who wore the coarse garb of one of the common soldiers of the expedition. They started at the sight of the Dreamer, and Rosita threw herself in front of the younger man, as if to protect him from the just wrath of her father.

A horrible thought struck Don Luis dumb for a moment. His eyes measured the man from head to foot.

## The Romance of the Fountain

"What, with a common soldier?" he said at last to his daughter; "you, the child of the Medranas?"

"No, with an Alvareda," Juan answered for Rosita, stepping forward and standing before her father with a quiet pride that had nothing of defiance. "You have reason to know the name. I am the son of your implacable enemy."

"What has brought an Alvareda to my standard?" Don Luis said after a pause.

"Love," the young man answered simply; "love. I came to protect your daughter: most of all against yourself and your dreams."

"If ever love replaces the hate of centuries between your race and mine, it shall not be *this* sort of love."

"It is a love that has brought me no stain," broke in Rosita.

Her father paid no heed to her words, but seemed to see only Juan.

"You know that I have power of life and

## Meeting of Foes

death over all in this camp?" he asked grimly.

"I know it," answered the other; "and what you will do, you will do. It would not be the first time that a Medrana had taken the life of an Alvareda, or an Alvareda that of a Medrana: and neither is given to fear."

The Dreamer seemed to debate some question with himself, the two keeping silent the while.

"I know but one thing that an Alvareda can claim from a Medrana besides death," he said at last, lifting his plumed hat in the grand Spanish manner to Juan, who returned the salutation no less ceremoniously—"and that is, the courtesy of a cavalier. I bow to the son of my lifelong enemy. And now," he added after a moment, with a long thoughtful look at the young man, "return to your quarters, and there await my orders." And taking his daughter by the hand, he led her slowly away.

But when father and child were once more

## The Romance of the Fountain

alone together, there was no violence in the one, there were no tears nor sobs in the other. He had too much on his conscience, and she too little on hers, for a stormy scene. Moreover, being the mystic and the visionary he was, this meeting face to face with the great hated name, suddenly on the other side of the globe, filled him with a sense of awe and of fate. It seemed to him somehow to be the work of God. The memory of his wife, who would have pleaded for Rosita had she been there, and a vague self-accusation with respect to past years, disposed him to be just. He remembered how, in the pursuit of his projects, he had left her to herself, to the chances and dangers of a solitary and neglected childhood; and he knew that if she could now look him fearlessly and proudly in the face, it was no thanks to himself.

As for her, there was something like a sense of relief in her heart. She was glad that the period of intrigue and concealment was over. She looked at her father, and said to herself

## Meeting of Foes

that her lover was perhaps in less peril, now that he was known and in the old man's power.

"Father, I trust you," she said, looking up into his eyes. "When an Alvareda is at a Medrana's mercy, he is safest."

Nor was she far wrong. He listened without show of anger and with but little comment to the story of her love, and of her meetings with Juan in Spain and here in the Indies.

"Poor child," he said, "poor child!" and laid his hand gently on her head, as he had been wont to do when she was little.

That night there was a tempest in the mystic Seeker's soul. All the generosity, all the courage that was in him, bade him respect the same qualities in the son of his old enemy. The unworthy suspicion that had passed like an evil shadow over him for an instant, had left no trace. His own honour refused to challenge that of his daughter's lover, or retain a doubt of her purity. His own troubled conscience, when he remembered that he had

## The Romance of the Fountain

sold her to Diego Perez, called on him to compare the two men, and say which of them was the fitter suitor, the fitter protector. He had tried to cheat himself into the belief that a marriage with his Chief Captain was necessary for her safety in case of his own death; and his conscience gave him the lie. He could not answer her. He dared not praise Perez when she pleaded for Juan: Perez, that he knew in his heart to be—what he was. All that was noble within him called on him to close the blood-feud of centuries by allowing the marriage of a Medrana with an Alvareda, to choose between his daughter's happiness and her misery for life.

And the Fount of Youth?

Its price was Rosita's hand. He knew that he could never have reached Bimini without the promise he had made. He knew that without Diego Perez he would never drink the draught. Perez was his indispensable captain, his essential adviser, his master. How could he



## Meeting of Foes

break with him? How could he give her to Juan?

“The Fount of Youth, the Fount of Youth. . . .”

And so he did as weak men like himself have ever done. He did as men in whose souls good and evil feebly struggle have ever done and ever will. He temporised and compromised, and trusted to the future to unravel the knot. And meanwhile he bade them wait and hope and be patient, and sought to bind them to secrecy, while he himself writhed in the grasp of Diego Perez.

But Juan had little faith in his promises.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE WOLF IN THE FLEECE

THEY were mistaken if they thought that Rosita's father was the only power to be reckoned with.

One day Rosita had met Juan at the usual spot in the forest, and each had taken a different path to return to the camp. The girl was slowly making her way along the mossy glades, when she started at the sight of a figure approaching through the trees.

"What, alone?" said Diego Perez—for he it was—"alone, and without thy Indian guard? Not even thy Indian handmaid; and in this forest, far beyond the sound of the camp bugles? Oh, this is rash!"

## The Wolf in the Fleece

"You have been dogging me," Rosita answered. "I don't care to be dogged."

"I saw thee leave the camp alone," he rejoined, with an ugly smile, "and spurred by love and fear for thy safety, I followed in thy steps for thy protection."

Rosita laughed scornfully.

"Does the roe require to be protected by the skulking wolf?" she asked.

He did not seem to hear her taunt.

"The forest is unsafe," he resumed; "even within sound of bugle. There are wild beasts about."

"Yourself, for instance?"

"Call me what thou wilt," he said, with a frown that belied his attempt at a smile. "Thou art fairest when thou callest me names. Love is sweetest when he looks fiercest and wears a lion's hide as a mantle."

"And hate," she retorted, "is most hideous when his wolfish bristles are seen through lamb-skin."

## The Romance of the Fountain

Perez laughed.

"Call me wolf again," he said with a bow. "It is so sweet to hear thee. Thou hast accustomed me of late to taunts and insults. They do no harm, and I take them as pet names."

"Then I'll call you simply Diego Perez," she said, looking him steadily in the face. "It is the most ill-omened name I know between the world's two poles."

A change came over his face.

"I have already outstretched the usual patience of a courtship," he said, "in wooing you so long. Do not *you* stretch it further, lest it should snap in two. I have your father's promise. You are mine. To-day I woo; but to-morrow I shall order. Don't fight too long with fate; and, above all, beware how you call the wolf too often by his name. Or if you do, wait till you have seen him rip."

"Ho, ho! the fleece is off," laughed Rosita.

## The Wolf in the Fleece

"And better so. It fitted you ill; and your growl is sweeter than your bleat."

"What, did I growl?" he said, tightening his teeth suggestively. "And yet I am no wolf. At most a lamb who, as it happens, has fangs, and who, elsewhere in other woods and other seasons, has occasionally eaten up a woman on less provocation than you, young lady, have given him to-day."

"I thank you for the warning," she answered, "though in truth I did not need it. And now be pleased to take some other path than mine to reach the camp."

"I owe it to your father to see you safely back."

"What! do you force your company upon me?" she asked. "Answer plainly."

"Force is an ugly word," he said. "It is my duty to see you through these brambles. And, besides, I have a little tale that I would like to tell you as we go along—a little tale about a woman. The story is pathetic and

## The Romance of the Fountain

instructive, and may show you the latent goodness of my heart. I wish to prove to you how kind a soul I have."

"I shall not listen," she rejoined, walking on.

"Oh, you'll hear enough for my purpose," he laughed, "whether you listen or not."

And he told her how once, in Spain, he had taken a girl for a walk by the tall reeds at sunset, a girl that had loved him just a little too well, and was irksome. And how he had suddenly told her to say any prayers she might have to say, as she had but five minutes to live. And how, with the great beads of sweat on her forehead, she had besought him not to send her unshriven to her Maker. . . . And how, in the great gentleness of his heart, he had actually shriven her himself as patiently as a barefooted friar, listening to the tale of her sins and her fibs, and her woeful love for himself, and the meat she had eaten on Fridays; and how he had then sent her to

## The Wolf in the Fleece

Heaven with her soul as clean as the new-starched frill she was wearing.

"The story is pathetic, is it not?" he laughed.

"I haven't been attending," she answered.

"Were it not better to make no more resistance, and accept so tender-souled a suitor?"

"Never, never!" she cried. "Not till God's lightning falls on your head. Oh, Omniscient and Omnipotent God, give me strength to fight out Thy battle with this man!"

Perez looked at her, admiration for her beauty struggling with his rage.

"You will think better of it at your leisure," he muttered.

"If all your soldiers help to drag me to the altar," she continued, "they shall not force me to be your wife; for I give you fair notice that I shall stab you on the altar steps, and be God's executioner. The day you have recourse to force shall be your last, and mine."

"What! threats of dagger?" he laughed.

## The Romance of the Fountain

"I love to see a beauty in her fury, and know how to value a woman's threat. It's a pretty bubble."

Rosita stopped, and stood in front of him, her face white and her teeth set.

"Look at this," she said.

She took a small dagger from her bosom, bared her left arm, and passed the weapon slowly through it.

"Do you believe me now?" she asked. "It is for you, not for me, to meditate at leisure, and weigh the peril."

And, leaving him rooted to the spot with surprise, she disappeared among the trees.

Perez looked after her long.

"By all the fiends on the devil's stair," he said to himself, as he walked slowly towards the camp, "I didn't think her so strong; and I own that this once I have reckoned without my host. Yes, she's right. It's for me to ponder the items of my scheme at leisure. She's dangerous; and I must change my plan



## The Wolf in the Fleece

from top to bottom, and build up the edifice of fortune on other ground. And better so, perhaps. The wind has shifted since last I looked at the compass; and it brings me whispers strangely tempting from the Indian King. And now that I am free to listen to his offer, and to found my altered schemes on his help, I can deal after my own heart with her father and herself."

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE PORTENT

THE demons painted on the walls of the great rock-temple of Bimini had disappeared under a tapestry of dewy blossoms, bright in its transient patterns; while the pillars of the huge fane of Beauty and Destruction concealed the scars of their immemorable age under a garb of odoriferous palms, and seemed to be holding each other like colossal captives with the ephemeral chains of spring. On the pavement the stains of human sacrifice were hidden by a freshly-strewn litter of numberless flowers. The troops of garland-girls who had been wreathing the temple had finished their task, and had at last taken their departure.

## The Portent

It was the Feast of Arrows. For seven days, the countless warriors of the most warlike nation of the Setting Sun were about to bring their quivers in silent companies, to the monotonous booming of the gong of gongs, that every long copper-headed shaft might get its baptism of poison. And never yet, since those stupendous columns had first been carved out of the living rock by long-dead generations, innumerable centuries ago, had venom of such potency been required to stem the rising tide of invasion; and never had the yearly Feast of Arrows been celebrated with such solemnity as on the present occasion, when the white invaders, with the impious help of the rebellious tribes, had reached the very gates of the capital.

Two figures were moving in the shadow of the great columns, both stricken in years—the one a tall, white-haired man in white pontifical robes; the other a woman so wrinkled and shrivelled that she might have been a mummy

## The Romance of the Fountain

divested of its swathings and re-animated, to prowl for an hour amid the scenes of a life extinct for ages.

"Is all ready, Othoxa?" asked the tall High Priest, approaching the shrivelled crone, and tying up one of the garlands, which had got unfastened. "Is all ready, where the perilous fumes of thy cauldron steam?"

"Yes," answered the Sorceress; "and woe betide the white invaders! They will not long be white, if they give battle. For the slightest scratch with any arrow or javelin of my steeping will make their pale, bloodless bodies turn black, and fit them for the burial-place of dogs. Oh, trust my brew. Have I not worked in poison till the very flies that sting me drop dead on the floor? The art which we have developed since the remotest antiquity, of feeding snakes on the juice of deadly plants, and then inoculating with their venom, increased in potency, the deadly plant itself, and so augmenting in a ceaseless circle the

## The Portent

power of poison, has now reached to incredible perfection. One black drop of our undiluted and last-developed death-juice——”

“I know,” said the High Priest. “But tell me, what demon shapes have risen up in thy fumes?”

“Three gods of terror,” answered Othoxa, “that were familiar to my visions, and one new one. First of all Eyes-of-Madness, he of the scarlet bat-wings. Then Ice-of-Fear, the god with the lidless eye-balls; and Wince-of-Agony, the mighty tormentor. The unknown spirit had the head of a tiger, with fair human limbs, which he kept unceasingly eating—every limb growing again while he ate the others. It was a wonderful and terrific vision; and never, since the god of Silent Horror, years ago, laid on my novice head his cold, restless wreath of living vipers, which turned my black hair white, have I beheld so dreadful a deity.”

“I know him well,” said the white-robed

## The Romance of the Fountain

pontiff. "He is the great and all-pervading god of Cosmic Cruelty. His name is Atafis; and it is owing to his unlimited power that Nature preys for ever on her own self—that the earth and the air and the sea are filled with millions of creatures who feed on others, and themselves are eaten. Is that the singing of thy poison-girls?"

A weird sound rose and echoed through the heavy vaults of the temple. The song was of the beauty and cruelty of Nature. How, when things were first made, the vapours of Hell had crept up to the surface of the world; how they had fattened the roots of the plants that kill, and how the sap of destruction had filled fruit and berry, while live trickles of horror had run through the grasses in the shape of innumerable snakes. How tetanus had followed the rattlesnake's bite, and palsy that of the cobra and the asp. Venom and blood were the juice of creation, and torture lorded it over earth and ocean. All Nature

## The Portent

teemed with claw and fang; above was beauty, beneath was pain. The leopardess lay in shadow and flowers, two live green embers glowing in her eyes. The sea was all sunshine, but the shark was beneath it; the wave of red water bubbled up from his triple row of teeth. But man was the monarch of torture; murder the breath of his nostrils. And the arrows they were dipping in the juices of night were winged with madness, with horror, with unthinkable pain.

"Thy maids sing well," said the High Priest, as the words died down. "The arrow-song is worthy of the temple of that gigantic man-devouring flower, goddess at once of Murder and of Beauty, whose ever-hungry tentacles grasp living human limbs; whose awful bosom is as ready to engulf a slave as the small sundew to engulf an insect. The Flower of Cruelty, the lonely Empress of the virgin forests, whom our fathers

## The Romance of the Fountain

enshrined in this rock-temple, and who has there grown in beauty and in appetite, is the symbol of what pervades the universe. The two great ruling powers of Nature are Cruelty and Beauty, Pain and Sunshine. And even as her enormous tendrils grasp the wretch whom each day we give her to devour, so Nature in her placid loveliness murders, through sea, earth, and air. The world is like the walls in which we are standing; there are thousands of flowers above, and catacombs of dungeons below. But I hear a sound of steps. Doubtless they are coming to tell me that the monarch is in sight. Atalpa comes to see how we have wreathed our walls and columns. Get thee gone, Othoxa."

A moment later, Atalpa the Ever-Young, accompanied by two tame pumas, and followed by an escort of dusky warriors, entered the great carved caves. He was strikingly handsome, at least so far as was compatible with



## The Portent

the Indian type of features; the admirable semi-nude limbs expressing the perfection of every physical quality that one man can envy in another—youth, strength, agility, endurance—and his face a sombre power. He towered in height above the rest, from whom he was distinguished in dress only by the single dazzling gem which he wore on his brow.

“Lord of the Pumas, ever beautiful and ever young Atalpa,” said the High Priest, bowing almost to the ground, “I bid thee welcome to these sacred and eternal caves, to-day as ever.”

“For a thousand years,” answered the monarch, “have these old columns, on the yearly Feast of Arrows, put on their garb of green, bursting as regularly into leaf as if they teemed with sap, and never yet has the King failed to come and praise the flowers. But for once I have neither eyes nor nostrils for garlands however sweet; and

## The Romance of the Fountain

I am come with a care-laden brow to consult upon the means which our religion offers, to stem the white invasion."

"My own thoughts have not been idle since the news grew darker," answered the High Priest. "I have gone over in my mind all the great invasions which we have baffled in the course of ages, and in each case I find that we have owed eventual triumph to one single cause—our policy of friendship with the gods. The gods, we must never forget it, are destructive forces; they act from appetite, not from justice. If they were just, there would be no need of prayer. Nothing is so mercenary as a god in man's necessity."

"The whites are few," said Atalpa, "compared with our legions; but they carry the thunderbolt with them, and the sound of it shakes the great forest: every echoing peal means scores of dead. Their heads are capped with metal, their breasts with plates that no shafts can transfix; their very fingers are

## The Portent

cased in a sort of white copper. If I had not seen with my own eyes the corpses of their dead, I should still think them gods. Besides, they have got the tribes as their allies."

"Now let me know," said the High Priest, "what presents thou bringest to the temple. Much will depend on that."

"I bring eleven shields of beaten gold, wrought round with figures that show the war between the gods and the pumas. Then I bring thee, in a precious casket, the great ruby known as the Eye of Wrath, and twelve barrels of minted gold."

"I think the Goddess will be willing to accept the gift," replied the High Priest.

"In presence of the peril which grows hour by hour," went on Atalpa, "there is a thought which haunts me by day and night. Dost thou remember the prophecy, ages old, which says: 'The day will come when this prosperous and victorious state will

## The Romance of the Fountain

wholly perish, if a white-skinned virgin be not offered up in sacrifice to the great Goddess'?"

"Yes," answered the other, "I recollect it. But it has always been interpreted to mean that a virgin would be miraculously born with a white skin among us."

"Ay, and rightly," said Atalpa, "so long as we didn't know that a white-skinned race existed in the world. But now we know it; and does it not seem as if the day were come for the fulfilment of the prophecy, now that the strangers have raised the tribes against us, and are marching on the capital?"

"Have the white invaders their women with them?" asked the High Priest.

"That I cannot tell," answered the Ever-Young. "But I mean to send an embassy and ask them for a truce, and so gain time, to get to know them better.—But who comes here?"

It was the Master of the Sacrifices. Consternation was written on his face.

## The Portent

"I come with staggering feet," he said, panting, and wiping the sweat from his forehead, "to bring the most monstrous news."

"Quick, quick! speak!" commanded Atalpa and the High Priest in one breath. "What is it? Don't keep us in suspense."

"A fearful portent," answered the newcomer; "a portent big with calamity to King and people. The ever-devouring Goddess of this temple, for the first time in history, has spurned her daily victim."

"Spurned her daily victim?" cried the High Priest. "Impossible! The omen would be too monstrous."

"I have just seen it—seen it with these very eyes," the Master of the Sacrifices went on. "Scarcely had we placed the gagged and writhing slave—a virgin of the black race of Xu—in the great Flower's lap, when a convulsion shook her immense petals. She relaxed the feelers which had grasped the body of the victim, and cast it out alive. We tried again

## The Romance of the Fountain

a second time ; and again she cast it out, alive just as before. And when we made a third attempt, the miracle took place even once more ; except that the slave was then cast out dead."

The High Priest raised his hands in a gesture of appalled despair.

"No such tremendous portent has ever prepared men's minds for disaster," he said in a low, shaking voice, "since the great star which trailed behind it a fan of fire depopulated heaven, and since the earthquake which shook the images of the gods to pieces, gave warning of the most fatal battle that our history records."

"Thou sayest well, Priest of the Scented Murderess," said Atalpa. "No such omen has prepared the minds of men for disaster for three centuries. But I see in this thing not only a presage of evil, but something more distinct. When I consider the peril that surrounds us, and when I remember the prophecy of old, the thing assumes another

## The Portent

aspect. I see a thought, a meaning, a purpose, a command. The tongueless Goddess, in thus spurning the victim we offer, means that she wants another—something new for her terrific maw; and I can read her wish as clearly as if she had spoken in words. She wants white flesh; and if we don't give it her, the pillars of this state will stagger and split, and with a crash that will outpeal the thunder with which the white men's engines shake the air—the edifice of ages will bury us in its fall."

And with a sign to his escort, he led the way out of the temple.

## CHAPTER XX

### IN THE SPANISH CAMP .

THERE was drinking and singing and casting of dice among the tents of the Spanish camp.

“Pass me the flagon, man,” cried one of the soldiers. “Till we dip our pewter in the Fount of Youth, this old Canary is as sparkling as any.

“‘There’s youth in each bubble  
That rises and winks ;  
No cares of age trouble  
The soldier that drinks.

“‘The sunshine is in it  
That ripened the grape ;  
So seize on the minute :  
The cannon-mouths gape.’”



## In the Spanish Camp

Another caught up the song :

“ ‘There’s youth in the tankard,  
There’s youth in the can ;  
The vine was uncankered  
That round the eaves ran ;

“ ‘And Age is a dragon  
The soldier can kill,  
If only the flagon  
Has wine in it still.’ ”

“ Ay, faith, there’s youth in this, and we had better enjoy it while we have it. Our little store of bottled sunshine will have trickled dry many a day and year before we reach the Fountain.”

“That it will,” answered the first ; “and every drop of cellared wine in Christendom as well. The magic water seems to be ebbing further and further from our eyes as every day goes by.”

“And yet,” put in a little black Biscayan who was sitting on a barrel, “they say the Commander thinks success quite certain, now

## The Romance of the Fountain

that the Indian King has sent the envoys. This morning they were walking through the camp with their great golden armlets."

"Yes, I saw them," replied the soldier who had taken up the drinking song. "And they are all old men, which of itself is sufficient proof against the Fount of Youth. For, if the Indians knew where it lies, would they send us white-haired ambassadors?"

"Ay, so I thought this very morning, as I saw them pass," said a Catalonian; "but Pedro says it's because their King keeps the magic water to himself, and takes good care not to let his subjects taste it, that he alone may be always young and strong."

"But some say that if he's got no wrinkles, it's because he's never twice the same," said another Biscayan.

"How, never twice the same?"

"I mean that he's elected for only a few years among the very strongest of their young warriors, and then yields his place to one as

## In the Spanish Camp

young. That's why he's never old, and youth is always on the throne. And if there's any truth in what they say, Atalpa is a title and not a name. And their young King, instead of having reigned six hundred years, hasn't reigned six hundred days."

"If that's so, the sooner we give up this wild-goose chase, the better for us all," said an Andalusian pikeman. "For my part, I'm getting to have less faith every day in this strange water."

"And yet," said a bullet-headed Castilian who was stringing a cross-bow, "I don't see why an old man shouldn't be struck young by a draught from the Fountain, if a man still young can be struck suddenly white."

"Struck white?"

"Yes, like Don Pedro de Vega."

"Who was *he*?"

"Why, he was a man to whom the impossible happened; and that always turns your hair white. If you've never heard the story I'll

## The Romance of the Fountain

tell it you," went on the crossbowman. "He was an officer of the King's guard at Toledo, and he feared neither man nor devil, neither Heaven nor Hell. So all the women of Toledo were in love with him.

"Late one night he was returning through some deserted streets when he perceived a woman leaning on a balcony in the moonlight. He stopped short, for he saw at once that she was marvellously handsome.

"‘It's a fine night, Don Pedro,’ said she.

"‘Oh, you know me?’ he answered.

"‘Who doesn't know Don Pedro de Vega in Toledo—and in Hell?’ she laughed.

"‘And which of the two is this?’

"‘Perhaps both.’

"So they talked on for a while; and presently she let down a silk ladder, and up he climbed, and found himself in a beautiful room full of light and mirrors and pictures, with gilded mouldings and rare paintings on the ceiling, and exquisite furniture. Then she led him

## In the Spanish Camp

into an inner room, where a small table was spread for two, with supper in splendid silver plate, and rich wines in glittering cut glass, just as if she had been expecting him. So, taking off his long straight sword, he placed it upright in the corner, and sat down to supper.

“She was quite the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life; and he remained with her till the white light of dawn crept in through the shutters. He had to be on duty at the palace early that morning; so he tore himself away from her at last; and promising to return soon, he left the house through the front door and hurried off. On his way he met one of his brother officers who was also bound for the palace, and as they went along told him of his adventure.

“‘Why, where’s your sword?’ says the other suddenly.

“Don Pedro clapped his hand to his hip; it was not there. He had forgotten it in the

## The Romance of the Fountain

house he had just left. So there was nothing for it but to return on his steps; and bidding his friend make an excuse for his being late at the palace, he hurried back.

"He found the street and the house, and called gently under the window. But there was no answer: the house was as silent as death.

"Presently a milkman came along.

"‘You waste your breath,’ said he; ‘that’s an empty house.’

"Don Pedro muttered a curse of impatience, and the other passed on.

"Then he tried throwing pebbles up at the window, but still in vain.

"A baker’s boy passed.

"‘That’s an empty house,’ he said, ‘empty for years.’ And he, too, passed on.

"Then Don Pedro, stepping back into the middle of the road, examined the house. It was now broad daylight. There could be no doubt: it was the one where he had passed

## In the Spanish Camp

the night. It was unlike all the others in the street, and had a very peculiar escutcheon cut in stone over the door. He had been struck by it overnight in the light of the moon.

“Suddenly his eye was caught by three little leaden seals on the lock. They were such as are put by the authorities on a house that is locked up by legal process.

“By this time a little crowd had begun to form round him, all of whom insisted that the house had been empty and locked up since any of them could remember.

“‘Bring me a ladder,’ he cried. And shaking his fist at the house, he swore by God’s thumbs he would see the riddle out.

“A ladder was brought and placed against the balcony. He climbed up and shook the shutter of the window through which he had entered some hours before. It was so rotten from neglect that it gave way at once. Before him was a room entirely empty of furniture, but full of dust and cobwebs. His feet left their print

## The Romance of the Fountain

on the fine white dust as clearly as if it had been fine snow. He recognised the room unmistakably. He recognised the paintings on the ceiling, but faded and discoloured; the mouldings of faded gold. There was no possibility of doubt: it was the identical room. And yet how could it be?

“He pushed his way through the old stale cobwebs into the inner room—the one where he had supped. It was as empty and dusty as the other; and there also he recognised the discoloured paintings on the ceiling, and every empty ornament of faint and faded gold.

“But, of course, it could not be, since all had been light and colour and fulness and splendour! and all here was emptiness and cobwebs and dust.

“He was about to turn and leave the room, when his heart suddenly stopped. There, in the empty corner, overspun with dusty cobwebs, stood his sword.”



## In the Spanish Camp

The Castilian ceased.

"And so his hair turned white?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Yes," said the Castilian, "from that hour. It always does when a man finds himself face to face with the impossible."

"I don't say no," said the Catalonian who had spoken before. "But a man can be struck suddenly old by many other things besides that. Doctor Faustus, for instance; he was struck back into old age by losing his ring."

"How that?" they asked.

"His youth depended on a magic ring that the Devil had given him. One night, when he was living at Venice with a famous wanton called Lucretia, she removed it from his finger while he lay asleep."

"Well?"

"He was lying in all his youth and beauty while she crouched over him, watching what would happen; trying to see beneath the surface of his life, like one who searches deep

## The Romance of the Fountain

waters for a corpse that can be caught only in glimpses. Well, as soon as the ring was off his finger, a change came over him. His face collapsed. A thousand wrinkles spread their network over it, and his hair whitened like whitening ashes as she watched him shrivel away. He had passed in two minutes from thirty to ninety."

"Well," said the Castilian, "it only proves that a man can pass suddenly from youth to age. And, as I said before, if a man can be struck white in a moment, why shouldn't a draught from the Fountain be able to strike a man young?"

"I don't know as to that," said the Andalusian, "but what I know is that I am getting to disbelieve more and more in the water."

"If only we were laying our hands on gold and jewels," said one of the Biscayans, "it wouldn't matter so much. But to have all these dangers and fatigues thousands of miles

## In the Spanish Camp

from home, and get after all neither gold nor youth——”

“That’s exactly what I say,” said the Andalusian. “Why, if the Fount of Youth exists, would not that God-curst and never-dying Hebrew, who trudges for ever round and round the world, over the graves of those whose ancestors he knew, have found it out by now? His curse compels his lonely dusty feet to measure and re-measure every inch of hill and plain, of city and desert; and if the Fount of Youth were to be found, he would have drunk the draught.”

“Perhaps he has,” said the Castilian.

“No, he is as old as ever,” said the other. “On the day before we sailed from Spain, while I was thinking of the Fount of Youth and all our hopes, I met him in the street as the twilight fell.”

A murmur of mingled curiosity and incredulity greeted his words, and the soldiers drew closer round the speaker.

## The Romance of the Fountain

“What was he like? Tell us what he was like.”

“His great white beard,” said the Andalusian, “more than a yard in length, waved behind him in the wind. In his hand he held a tall spiked staff, on which the fifteen records of his centuries were notched. His Syrian sandals, bound on with dusty thongs, were made of thickest hide of crocodile, to stand the wear and tear of his eternal trudging. His wrinkled gourd, the minister of his eternal thirst, only less wrinkled than his face, swung from his girdle, that was made of one great snake-skin, with its tail in its mouth, the symbol of his life. I barred his way. Like a sleeper suddenly awakened, he started and stared, and a flame shot out of his sunken sockets. ‘Why dost thou stop me, Ephemeral?’ he asked. ‘Walk to thy grave, and let me go my way, to make for the earth another belt of steps.’ ‘Tarry,’ I answered, ‘only to tell me this: Hast thou never lighted, in thy

## In the Spanish Camp

endless journey, on the thing they call the Fount of Youth?' He paused for a moment, while a frown of pain convulsed his forehead. 'The Fount of Youth?' he said, like one slowly muttering in a dream. 'It bubbles up between Death's feet, in every land, in every plain and every city; and what have Death and I in common?' And he passed on, and disappeared in the twilight."

The soldiers shook their heads, and looked at one another.

"Strange, very strange," said a Gallician bowman. "There's still a little wine at the bottom of the flagon. Pass it round. Can any of you tell me: is it true that since Thursday the Commander's daughter wears her arm in a sling?"

"Ay, it's as true as gospel," answered the Castilian who had spoken before. "At first they said she'd had a fall; but now they say one of her Indian women sprang at her with a knife. They're as lithe as panthers, and

## The Romance of the Fountain

as savage. They say she's pardoned her and hushed it up."

"Well, anyhow, she's hurt," said his mate. "And here's to her good health. She's been the soldier's friend all through. Dost thou remember how she took up our cause against Morasquez when he tried to cheat us of the salt, and how she saved Pedrillo from the lashes when all was ready?"

"And he's grateful," said the Castilian. "He'd give his life to save her little finger. Yes, let's drink her health with what's left in the flagon. Here's to her quick recovery! And now let's finish the chorus:

"There's youth in the barrel,  
There's youth in the keg;  
So thump, as you carol,  
Your dry wooden leg;

"And think, as you tiddle  
At eighty and more,  
That so the old cripple  
Has youth as before.'"

## CHAPTER XXI

### SILENT PERIL

As the days passed by, Don Luis sank deeper and deeper into his Chief Lieutenant's power, and writhed in soul ever more helplessly. He felt his will weakening in the man's brutal grasp, and temporised and compromised and played a double game from morning to night. He daily took more and more to the son of his old hereditary foe, and daily felt less and less able to give him his daughter, as his heart bade him do.

"Wait," he said to him, "wait. All will come right in the end. But not yet, not yet. Wait till the expedition is over. All will then be different. First we must have the consent of your father Alvareda; and that

## The Romance of the Fountain

can be obtained only when we return to Europe glorious and triumphant. Then he will be more eager for this marriage than even my own self. The honour of an alliance with the Conqueror of Youth will outweigh all the centuries of hatred that have divided our ancestors, and will blot out the injuries that have hardened our hearts. Wait and be patient."

So he had imposed on them both the strictest command to keep their relations from the knowledge of the Chief Captain, whom he continued to treat openly as his daughter's future husband. Indeed, in his miserable subjection, he made this secrecy towards Perez the absolute condition of his favour and of his acquiescence in their loves.

Nothing led them to believe that Perez suspected. The Chief Captain had offered no opposition when Don Luis had expressed his intention of raising Juan from the ranks, and he treated him with sufficient civility in public



## Silent Peril

when he took his place among the officers, with whom he was already a favourite. It was true that when Juan had occasion to meet Perez alone, he would see the latter's brow darken unmistakably, and more than once he had seen him fasten a long and evil look upon him when he thought himself unwatched. But after the struggle they had had together on the ship before reaching Bimini—a struggle in which Juan had had the upper hand—it would have been strange had it been otherwise. On the surface the affair seemed to be forgotten; and though fully alive to the Chief Captain's treachery and vindictiveness, Juan felt but little fear, till a circumstance occurred which pointed to more hidden peril and to a more implacable hatred.

One evening he was sitting in the corner of his tent occupied in mending his clothes, which had much need of repair. The light was fading so fast that he was about to lay

## The Romance of the Fountain

aside his work, when suddenly the canvas was noiselessly lifted and a dark face peered into the tent. The light being less within than without, the stranger did not see Juan, whose eyes, accustomed to the half light, were following all his movements; while Juan on his side recognised in him an Indian whom he knew to be one of the personal attendants of Diego Perez, and devoted to his service. After having assured himself, as he thought, that the tent was empty, the Indian crept in stealthily, and drawing out a small bottle-shaped gourd, bent over Juan's empty bed and threw back the blanket. Then he shook the gourd up and down over it in various directions, as if he were sprinkling the bed with some liquid. Nothing, however, seemed to issue from the opening, till suddenly something shot out of it—something small and black and wriggling, at sight of which the young Spaniard felt an icy thrill run through him. But in another instant he had leapt up,

## Silent Peril

and in a single bound had sprung on the half-naked Indian, and, grasping him irresistibly by the neck and shoulders, had forced him, face downwards, on the bed and on what he had put into it. There he held him down, writhing and helpless, till his limbs, after a few dreadful convulsions that grew weaker and weaker, ceased to struggle, and became rigid in the death that he had intended for another. Then Juan lifted the man's body off the snake that lay crushed underneath it, and cast both of them out of the tent into the night.

From that moment Juan felt that his life was in peril from something that was far more difficult to deal with, and that required far more vigilant watching, than the open hatred of his enemy. But he mentioned the incident to no one, not even to Rosita. She could not have helped or protected him, and she had terrors enough of her own to rob her of sleep and peaceful dreams.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE AMBASSADORS

Two Indian envoys, waiting in Diego Perez's tent with the answer to certain proposals that he had made to their ever-young King, were conversing in a low tone. They had with them another Indian to act as interpreter. He had once got lost in the great forests, and had strayed into a small Spanish settlement in Yucatan, where he had acquired some knowledge of the language, and had somehow eventually made his way back to Bimini. Satisfaction gleamed in the envoys' eyes, for the spirits who shaped the destinies of their state seemed to have given it their support.

## The Ambassadors

The treaty seemed in a fair way to completion, and all was going well.

"Success is certain," whispered the Chief Ambassador; "and Heaven itself is giving us omens of its favour. Late last night, as I was fathoming the sky for a sign among the million stars, an unknown constellation, in the shape of a great puma, twinkled into sight, with head erect and victorious."

"Strange," said the other; "this morning I, too, beheld the puma made of cloud. It lasted but a minute."

"That matters little, if but the emblem of our people showed itself," answered the Chief Envoy. "We have made a great and cunning treaty. It gives us the white virgin on whom the saving of our state depends. And the same clause which gives her to our great Goddess, secures what we would have the Goddess grant—the departure of the invaders."

"Hast thou seen her?" asked his companion.

"The mind of man could conceive no whiter

## The Romance of the Fountain

victim," answered the Chief. "White as the white invaders are, she seems to belong to some yet whiter race. Her pearly skin seems not to be of human texture, but of the same white material which forms the water-lily's petals, or the disc of the thin moon at day-break, when it floats most wafery in the sky. As I saw her among her handmaids of our own swarthy race, she seemed to be some pearl-faced spirit."

"All is strange and unlike reality among these white-faced warriors," the Second Envoy rejoined. "Hast thou examined their lightning-spitting weapons? Would'st thou care to handle them?"

"Not I. As soon take up the thunderbolt itself when it lies folded in the arrow-house of Heaven. But hush! here comes the Spaniard."

"Well," said Perez through the interpreter, after a few words of perfunctory compliment and salutation, "have you received your King's answer? Does he agree?"

## The Ambassadors

"His messenger has returned, and he agrees," answered the Chief Ambassador through the same channel. "And in token of his satisfaction, Atalpa sends thee five of his largest rubies."

The Chief Captain took the stones with a hand whose greedy haste he restrained by an effort, and held them to the light. They were of enormous size.

"Let me see them," he said. "They seem good stones, though I have seen larger. I have a taste for such, and thank him. And now let us recapitulate the terms of this secret pact. First, I engage to hand over to you the daughter of our Chief."

"She must be given up to us in public by her father," said the Envoy. "Our creed exacts it; else she would have no value for our Goddess."

"You need have no fear," answered Perez. "She shall be given up freely and openly. The glittering bait with which I mean to lead

## The Romance of the Fountain

him into the trap is bright enough for that. If you will promise to lay the stipulated ambush by the brink of some solitary forest pool, which I will tell him is the Fountain of Youth, I undertake to make him, as its price, give her up in presence of his soldiers, and bind myself to send him thither to his death."

"We have a dozen magic springs," said the second of the Envoys; "but none that makes men young."

"Oh, any pool will do," the Chief Captain replied with a laugh, "provided you kill him by its brink."

"The ambush shall be laid," said the Chief Envoy.

"Then, once he is killed," Perez resumed, "and once I am in possession of supreme command, I undertake to draw away our forces from this land, on payment of three hundred bags of gold of the stipulated weight."

"All this Atalpa understands and has sworn to," answered the Indian.



## The Ambassadors

"Then there remains nothing further to settle," said Perez, "save the details of hour and place, which we can do to-night. By then I shall have worked on my Commander's mind. So for the while farewell."

And he dismissed his visitors, and remained pacing up and down the tent. His scheme was prospering. Everything was marching for the best. "But, O wondrous and ever-young Atalpa," he mused, "thou art young and innocent indeed. I am an honest pirate, and shall keep our stipulations to the letter; and in return for thy three hundred bags of gold, if all goes well, I shall relieve thee of the white invaders' presence. But have I pledged myself never to return? The land that has given me these rubies is not one to be left for long, and thou shalt see me again on thy shores. And now, to manage that yet greater fool who day by day counts his wrinkles in the mirror."

He had not long to wait. The curtain of

## The Romance of the Fountain

the tent was raised, and Don Luis appeared in the entrance—the same vague and wistful face as ever, but with an eager light of expectation in the pale grey eyes.

“I saw the Envoys leave the tent,” he said. “How go the negotiations?”

“Did I not tell you that you would not repent having left them wholly in my hands?” answered Perez. “Prepare your soul for mighty news.”

“Quick! Tell it me at once,” the other cried, seizing him by the arm.

“Prepare your soul for what your thoughts have played with for many a year,” Perez repeated.

Don Luis stamped his foot with a childish impatience.

“Don’t keep me dangling on the tenter-hooks of thy vague phrases,” he chafed. “Out with it. Tell me what it is. Are we any nearer to the Fount of Youth? Answer; quick, quick!”

## The Ambassadors

"The Fount of Youth is yours." And Perez, folding his arms, watched the effect of his words on the weak, eager face.

"O God! this is too sudden," the Dreamer murmured, pressing his hand to his side, as if to control some acute and dire pain. "Do not kill me with joy, but give me strength to bear it. . . ."

The Chief Captain waited till the other resumed his composure.

"The Indian King," he said, as the Youth-Seeker signed to him to proceed, "consents to let you reach the Fountain with a small escort, provided you will bind yourself, by all you hold most holy in our religion, to leave the land with all your forces the moment you have tasted the magic water."

"My soul is drunk and dazzled," said Don Luis. "There's too much light for thought round about it. Give me time to grasp thy words. My ideas press on each other's heels like a mob, and hustle me along as I reel from

## The Romance of the Fountain

the awful blow of joy. I pray thee, leave me for a little. I would fain be alone for a few minutes, until my staggered soul can keep its footing."

Perez left the tent, after fastening a long and curious look—was it contempt or triumph?—on his Chief. Don Luis threw himself on a couch, and grasped his aching forehead in his hands.

But was it of any use to try and think?

He had the Fount of Youth! He had the Fount of Youth! That was the only thought that he was able to shape. And was it a real thought? It seemed more like a feeling, a sort of terrible brightness within him. He had the Fount of Youth! He had the Fount of Youth! His hand was on the end and object of his life.

That ever-rosy God, that ever-smooth-browed Spirit, that swift wearer of the sandals of the Dawn, had he at last overtaken him? Was he at last his? Oh, how long he had pursued him

## The Ambassadors

day and night on the silent river of the Years ; for ever seeming to clutch the dazzling shade, while Time's remorseless current but increased the space between them. . . . And now, at last, at last, as if by a sudden bound, he held him in his grasp !

He drew a little mirror from his doublet, and looked at himself in it.

Look at these wrinkles, look at that long line down his cheek, and at that deep starry crowsfoot under the eye, at those deep furrows on his forehead. . . . Oh, how he laughed at all those wrinkles now ! The rosy finger-tip of ever-glorious Youth would wipe them out on the morrow. And those flakes of snow on his head and on his beard, the morrow's sun would melt them for ever. To-day his brow was still the shrivelled parchment on which the Cares had written their lamentable story ; to-morrow it would be the virgin tablet where Love would write in kisses. The prize was won. He had the Fount of Youth ! The goal

## The Romance of the Fountain

was reached. Dream was dream no longer. Now the rosy spirits that did the errands of the smooth-browed God might come and hover round him, as they had hovered round old *Æson*, when *Medea's* art had called them from the mansions of the Sunrise to make him young once more, to let him drain Youth's cup beautiful and god-like. . . .

*Æson*? Oh, he would lift the golden beaker as *Æson* never did! He would lift it higher than he himself ever had on the wildest day of adolescence in the expansion of natural youth! He would plant his foot upon Death's neck, crowned with acanthus and roses! He would defy earth's care, earth's woe; and, like a god, panting with life, he would drink to the rising sun!

A voice startled him in the midst of his triumphant imagining.

"There is one article in the treaty," said *Perez*, whom he had not heard re-enter the tent, "which I had perhaps better tell you

## The Ambassadors

of now. As you must pass, in order to reach the Fount of Youth, by many of his shrines and temples, the Indian King insists on a hostage, whom he will keep as long as you are there, that no offence should be offered to his gods."

"What hostage has he fixed on?" asked the Commander in a voice that betokened no interest.

"Your daughter," answered the Chief Captain.

"My daughter? Never, never! He must take some one else. It's preposterous."

"He will take no one else."

"What!" cried Don Luis, "place my daughter in his hands, entrust her beauty to his ever-young, ever-burning passions! You are mad."

"If you refuse," said Perez coldly, "he breaks the pact. Then farewell the Fount of Youth!"

Don Luis walked up and down the tent in

## The Romance of the Fountain

silence, his gathered brow bent downwards, and his fingers twitching unceasingly.

"It can't be that he'll take no other," he said, stopping suddenly. "I say he must take some one else. Do you realise what it means? What! place her in Atalpa's hands for days, perhaps for weeks? Alone? The only white? Among the priests of his blood-stained gods? Lost in the depths of his frightful Indian cities?"

"Atalpa is inexorable," said Perez. "You must choose between this condition and the Fountain of Youth."

"You must shake his exaction."

"Do you think that I, who am her lover, her betrothed," said the Chief Captain, "that I, to whom she is dearer than the breath of life, have left one word untried?—though, indeed, I think there is no danger; for Atalpa is bound by self-interest to respect her. And now, I say once more, he'll take no other as a hostage. So now I leave you. You have until to-night



## The Ambassadors

to think the matter over. Meanwhile, if you'll wait a little in your own tent, I'll send you one who will help you to come to a decision."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### MAGIC

ONCE more the Seeker of Youth was alone; and once more he walked up and down, gnawing his hand in his anguish.

A great shadow seemed to have fallen upon him, wrapping him round, and changing him utterly. A moment before he had been a man grizzled, indeed, of hair and beard, but still strong and keen and active, in whose eyes the light of a great hope, of a great joy, sparkled as in an overbrimming cup. But now the features were white and drawn and pinched; the back bent with a hopeless weight; the step shuffling and listless. He had aged by twenty years. He

## Magic

stretched out his hands with a vague, groping gesture, as if trying to grasp something intangible that he had lost; then brought them back to his brow, as if to fix some thought that was escaping.

"O God! O God!" he cried, "why dost Thou dazzle me with the great triumph of my life, and then snatch away from me the common light of Heaven?—Rosita as Atalpa's hostage—the only white among countless swarms of Indians, of Indians who have never once seen a living white woman; the single head round which the waves of their lust may close at any moment? He said that she was to serve as a pledge that no offence shall be offered to any of their gods and temples. . . . Why, any soldier of my escort may do so in his folly. Or I myself, by a careless gesture, by an unwary word, may rouse the wrath of their priests, and then her life will be forfeit. O God, God! it is too frightful. I can't do it. It would

## The Romance of the Fountain

be better to tear up the treaty and reach the Fount by force. How can I place her in such peril? How can I build my success on my own child's death?"

And falling forwards on the bed, he shut out the light of day, but not the horror of the situation.

He seemed to feel the tiny and invisible spirits of Age plying their inexorable little chisel on the stone of his brow, carving their innumerable wrinkles. He felt them sprinkling their tiny snow-flakes on his whitening head. He felt them blowing on his hand till it trembled like a tremulous tree, and fastening their palsy on his limbs like the fetters of a felon. They perched on his neck and on his shoulder, bending both with their unseen weight, deadening feeling and thought, drawing him in the darkness by a thousand invisible meshes nearer and nearer to the grave.

How cold he felt; how numb his heart had become! How quickly the tide of

## Magic

exultation had ebbed! Five minutes ago it had thundered at the flow, advancing to victory. And now the heavy waters of his soul were as sluggish as Dead Sea brine. Five minutes back, his conquering hand had been on the mighty prize, about to grasp it victoriously, and his fear for her had stricken it with palsy. . . .

He heard some one enter, and looked up. An unexpected figure was standing before him, from which he recoiled to the furthest corner of the tent.

It was a living mummy, covered with minute wrinkles, and black, save for the snow-white tuft on her forehead. She was clad in brilliant yellows and reds; an enormous snake was winding slowly round her neck, and, guided by her black, shrunken hand, was caressing her hideous face with its forked and restless tongue. Behind her stood the interpreter.

"This is Othoxa, the Priestess of Dark

## The Romance of the Fountain

Spirits," said the Indian, "the saturated charmer of deadly snakes. The Chief Captain sends her to impart such knowledge as lies in her cobra-bitten breast about the Spring of Youth."

"The Spring of Youth?" said the Mystic heavily. "Ah, yes, I remember. She was to come and tell me of the road. How far from here does it lie?"

"It lies in the great central forests," answered the Sorceress, when his question had been interpreted; "a twelve days' march from this, if speed be used. It is hidden in depths which man does well to shun, and where at most some wounded puma laps now and then the healing wave. None know the path, save only Atalpa's mutes, of whom one will be given thee as a guide. They bear the semblance of great youth, but they are ages old. Their tongues were cut more than a thousand years ago, lest they should reveal the secret of the Fount. They and the King alone have ever tasted of its water."

## Magic

"What is the aspect of the Fountain?" he asked, mastering the horror with which her wrinkled hideousness—the very incarnation of age—filled his soul, and approaching a step nearer.

"There is nothing by which it could be told from any other," answered Othoxa. "It looks a simple and natural forest spring, save only this, that if you examine it closer, its depths are strewn with pebbles of virgin gold. Where it wells up, it is of small size; a mere rippling diamond that nestles in the moss. Beyond, it forms a pool covered with floating flowers, and changes into a dark and unfathomed emerald."

"Whence did it get its virtue?" he asked again.

"Some say," answered the Sorceress, "that it has trickled through caverns in which the cunning powers who dwell in the earth prepare the germs of life and the saps of Nature. Others assert that the great and panting God of Generation, the flame-tongued Atapoota, as

## The Romance of the Fountain

he passed it one day, cooled his dark limbs in its ripples, and gave it his virility even for ever."

"How many draughts must he who seeks youth take of the spring?" he asked.

"A single draught suffices," said Othoxa, "if taken from the Fountain head, to change the most wrinkled and tottering age into youth's most radiant strength. If I cared to try, it would convert these hideous limbs of mine into limbs of youth and beauty such as thou hast never dreamt of. But I have drunk of other waters, even of those of the Fount of Age, which have given me for ever knowledge and powers that I would not exchange for those thou seekest. Ay, the Fount of Youth is potent. I will give thee a small example of its strength."

She drew a little phial from her withered bosom.

"This," she said, "contains a single drop of brightness from the Spring of Youth, weakened



## Magic

in a hundred times its bulk of common water."

Don Luis sprang forward, and tried to snatch the phial from her hand.

"Give it," he cried wildly, "let me drink it."

But brandishing the snake round her head, Othoxa repelled the rash attempt, and made him recoil once more into the further corner of the tent.

"Back, back!" she shrieked. "This single diluted drop, if drunk in violence and in the teeth of Heaven, would strike thee into everlasting dotage, not everlasting youth. But wait; be patient. Hast thou, perchance, some dry and long-dead thing?"

She looked round the tent, as if in search of what she needed. Presently her eye fell on a wreath of black spiked twigs which hung over the Commander's bed. It was a crown of thorns, once belonging to some ancient image of the Crucified Saviour, which an ancestor of his had brought from the East more than a

## The Romance of the Fountain

century and a half before, and which the Seeker of Youth carried with him as a protection against evil in the lands of the heathen. Then she pointed to the bowl that stood on the tent table.

"Fill this with water," she said, "and now take down that wreath."

He obeyed her without protest, his intense desire to see what she would do mastering his reluctance to disturb the relic.

"These thorns are very old?" she asked.

"They were old when thou wert born," he answered.

"Well, then," she said, "place the wreath in this bowl, and observe what happens when a drop from the phial is added."

He laid the black relic in the bowl. It floated lightly on the water.

"That will do," said the Sorceress; and she poured into it one bright drop from the phial.

Don Luis watched, holding his breath. For a half minute nothing took place. Then the

## Magic

wreath suddenly quivered. Little green shoots sprouted up on the black intertwined twigs, between the cruel thorns. Then they grew into leaves, and the little white flowerets of the thorn rapidly changed the black and sapless wreath into a garland as fresh and dewy as if it had been gathered that moment from an April hedge.

“O wondrous sight! O dazzling transmutation!” he cried.

“If one drop,” said Othoxa, “can work this miracle on dead thorns, think what a cupful from the Fount itself will do for him who quaffs it. And now, farewell for to-day. Before thou startest, we shall meet once more. It is I who am to take thy daughter to the great temple city where Atalpa, Lord of the Pumas, rules in his endless youth, and who will place her as a hostage in his hands. This wreath is thine.”

And with these words, gathering up the lazy coils of the huge python that hung

## The Romance of the Fountain

round her neck, the dark wrinkled Sorceress left him.

He stood, still staring at the flowering crown of thorns, still thunderstruck by the marvellous efflorescence—surely the most glorious and resistless proof that ever dazzled human eyes. What doubts, what hesitations or compunctions, could stand against such a miracle as this? A minute ago this mass of white blossom, whose breath delighted the passing breeze, had been dry, black wood, charred by age; the relic of forgotten years. And look at it now, in all its new-born beauty! . . . How soft, how sweet, how infinitely lovely—the loveliest thing that his eyes had ever gazed on!

“O God of Youth! O aurora-pinioned Spirit!” he cried, “forgive thy devotee, if for a single moment he wavered on the pathway that led to thy shrine. Have I not offered up, O Youth, whatever thou hast claimed—sleep, repose, health, friendship, country, home, and fortune? And shall I now deny thee what thou askest?”

## Magic

Shall I rebel against thee because of a few hours' risk to Rosita—to Rosita, of the immortalising of whose beauty this miracle is the heavenly pledge? Away with the craven fear. Rosita's loveliness in the far years to come—perhaps even centuries from to-day—shall be as bright, as scented, and as dewy as the fragrant wreath before me. The crown of Sorrow is the crown of Hope and Youth. I will lay it on her head."

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE FIGHT ROUND THE LITTER

As Juan had told Rosita some time before, there was a conspiracy afoot among a part of the men to escape from the camp, march back to the coast, seize one of the ships, and sail away to Europe, or at least to Hispaniola. Of this conspiracy Juan, who considered that he owned no allegiance to the Commander, was himself the soul. To carry away Rosita from the dangers of all sorts which he foresaw for her in the subsequent stages of the expedition, as well as to withdraw her from the molestations of Diego Perez, was more than sufficient reason for his action. The principal motive of the others was jealousy and hatred of the Chief

## The Fight Round the Litter

Captain, who had behaved of late with great harshness and tyranny ; and a growing disbelief in the reality of the Fountain, or even of any notable prize in the way of gold or gems.

The refusal of Rosita to abandon her father by no means put an end to Juan's share in the preparations and secret discussions of the conspirators. He still hoped to override her objections ; and though he, of course, would have let the others depart without him if her resolve proved unshakable, he felt in any case bound to afford them all the help in his power, especially in the dangerous and difficult matter of securing the necessary Indian guides for the escape to the coast.

Things were at this point when their action was suddenly precipitated by the news which spread through the camp that Rosita was about to be given up to the enemy as a hostage, while the Commander journeyed, with a small escort, to the spot where the Fountain was supposed to lie. Indeed, it was soon

## The Romance of the Fountain

known that she had already been placed in the hands of Atalpa's Indians, and was to be conveyed—perhaps in a few hours—to the great temple city.

It now became urgent to carry out the plan at once. Rosita's consent was no longer material, and Juan's part was clear. The first step was to rescue her at all hazards. He found his fellow-plotters scarcely less anxious to make the attempt than himself. The girl was adored by the little army, and especially by the men who were most devoted to Juan, and who most hated the Chief Captain.

After hurried conference, the plotters decided that the best plan would be to lie in wait for Rosita's litter and its convoy at a point where they would be obliged to set the litter down on account of some natural obstacle. There was a river which they would have to ford some four or five miles from the camp; and, on Juan's advice, this spot was selected for the purpose. The Indians who were to form



## The Fight Round the Litter

her guard would probably not exceed thirty or forty; but that would be quite double their own number, and each Spaniard knew that he would be matched against at least two of the enemy.

And so, in the dark forest, by the black overshadowed stream, they waited, where the great crooked branches of the unfamiliar trees stretched across over the water towards each other, and the current of the sunless ford rippled over the shallows with a ceaseless gurgle. As he crouched, holding his breath in the thick leafy underwood, a double force spurred Juan's soul to succeed or die in the doubtful attempt. On the one hand, there was the danger which he realised but too well for Rosita, were she once in the hands of Atalpa—a danger he would have staked his life to avert, even if he had not vaguely suspected foul play. On the other hand, love and liberty, and all the promise of the future, called on him to deliver her for his own sake, and

## The Romance of the Fountain

impelled him to win her for himself, and bear her to the coast.

The moments of waiting seemed endless. But at last a crackling of dead leaves and a few guttural sounds came to them through the trees, and they sprang to their weapons in silence. They saw the first armed Indians of the escort approach and stop by the ford; and anon the litter appeared between the leaves. Rosita's white face—whiter than ever by contrast with the black mummy-like features of Othoxa, who sat by her side—looked worn and ill, as her eyes followed absently the movements of her swarthy attendants. As Juan expected, the litter was set down for a few moments while the Indians measured the depth of the stream. The Spaniards knew that, being numerically inferior, death was in defeat. So they fell on the Indians with the suddenness of a thunderbolt.

The first group, between themselves and

## The Fight Round the Litter

Rosita, were cut down in an instant; yet not so quickly but that the others had time to throw themselves in front of the litter, round which an inextricable tangle of a struggle took place, body to body, weapon to weapon; both parties being hampered by the fear of injury to the prize for which they were contending. Could any one have noticed Rosita's face, he would have seen in it no fear for her own self, but only intense anxiety for the fate of one particular figure that was gradually working its way towards her through the *mêlée*. . . . Several of the combatants rolled together into the stream, and were swept into its deeper pools, still locking each other in the death-grapple. But every Spaniard that was lost sensibly diminished the chances of the surprise, while the Indians could afford to lose those that fell.

At last Juan, closely followed by four or five of his men, reached Rosita, and laid his hand on the litter. In another moment she

## The Romance of the Fountain

would have been his. But just as she was about to leap from the litter into his arms, she saw the swarthy sorceress by her side crane suddenly forward towards him, like one of her own black and yellow snakes on the strike, and a knife gleamed before the girl's eyes. Rosita's own dagger was not less quick. It leapt like lightning on Othoxa's stooping form, but too late to prevent her blow. The horrible crone crumpled up like a crushed insect. But Juan's grasp on the litter relaxed. He fell back with closing eyes into the confused mass of combatants, and the litter was borne off by its dark-skinned defenders. At the same moment a fresh squad of Indians—the rearguard of the convoy—appeared on the scene, and with hoarse and hideous shouts joined in the struggle. A few minutes later all was over. The rescue had failed.

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN THE ROCK TEMPLE

A MONTH had scarcely passed since the Feast of Arrows. The innumerable flowers that had clad the great rock temple were scarcely withered, and the sacred gardens had scarcely had time to raise another crop, when, lo! the garland-girls were busy once again, crouching by hundreds on the pavement for a far greater feast. It was no yearly pageant that called for their skill and their fancy; but a rite unprecedented in the annals of the dusky race that had carved those columns out of the living rock. It was for the fulfilment of a prophecy centuries old, which Heaven's heralds were ushering in with every portent, sign, and

## The Romance of the Fountain

prodigy. For had not the northern sky, three days before, assumed the hue of the pale, thin blood which runs in white men's hearts; and had not the earth quivered and undulated underfoot?

The victim was due to arrive that day at sunset; and Atalpa was come to watch the garlanding and the preparations for the great procession and the sacred dances. Everything, the High Priest told him, would be ready by the stated moment, and all would be on a scale befitting the greatness of the occasion. A hundred virgins, taken from the darkest of the tribes, with panther-skins and with anklets of red gold, were to lead her to the altar of Destruction. The troops of warriors had been selected among the very finest. The companies of priests, too, were ready, in new sacrificial robes of spotless linen. The snake-charmers and the sacred jugglers were greater in number than the oldest man could recollect. Countless flowers of every shape and colour

## In the Rock Temple

had been collected to strew on the victim's path. As for the dances, the javelin-men were practising all day a gigantic reel of death, to be danced round the victim in the hall of the three hundred columns. Then a dance of snake-men and sorcerers round about her, with many new varieties of dreadful movement. The sorcerers were to show in their fumes spirits as yet unknown, and the shadows of demons in a lurid haze. Never had the Flower of Destruction had so great and dreadful a pageant since the first shuddering slave had been offered up to the great Executioner and Goddess fresh from the boundless forests.

"And the chants?" asked Atalpa.

"The beauty and cruelty of Nature," answered the High Priest, "will be expressed in a great, slow death-dirge, which will be intoned as the great procession winds along to the slow boom of the Gong of Gongs. The heavy odour and resistless strength of the Dread

## The Romance of the Fountain

Flower will be praised in new sacrificial hymns as we approach her altar, and as we lay the white victim in her lap."

"Good," said the ever-young King. "But, while thou hast been preparing all these flowers, and hast been giving all thy thoughts to the procession, the chants, the dances, I on my side have not been idle, but have been maturing in the shade the other half of this great work of death: the ambush to which the great White Chief, tempted by the promise of a magic spring, is to be drawn in the depths of the mighty forest. I have chosen as the fittest spot the dark, ever-memorable pool known as the Fount of the Yellow Spirits, where the tribe of Hara was massacred to a man sixty years ago. The huge trees that cluster round the solitary water are hollow one and all, and each of them can hold a dozen silent warriors now as then, and the loneliness not lessened. His escort will be small, and although they carry



## In the Rock Temple

the thunder-pealing weapons that make them invincible elsewhere, the trees will be in our favour, and can hide more warriors in their hollow trunks than the massacre requires."

"The spot is well chosen," answered the High Priest. "May the ambush prove as successful as the one which ended the accursed tribe of Hara!"

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a messenger. The white maiden, he announced, would arrive at sunset, if all went well. He himself had hastened on faster than she could be borne on her litter. The wounded would arrive on the morrow by slower stages.

"The wounded!" exclaimed Atalpa.

As they had been fording the river of Green Snakes—the messenger explained—at sunset on the day they started, a sudden and desperate attempt had been made to rescue the white maiden. Twice the whites had surrounded her litter, got possession of it, and borne it away,

## The Romance of the Fountain

and twice it had been snatched back ; until at last, by dint of numbers, and with the help of javelin-hurling spirits, she had been saved for the Goddess at the price of many lives. The leader of the onslaught, one of the white men's younger chiefs, badly wounded, had been captured with three of his companions, and they were being brought to swell the show.

"It was a wise thought to spare them for the torture," said Atalpa. "They can be carried in the great procession, and then handed over to the tormentors. This attempt at her rescue, although it has failed, makes me uneasy lest the ambush for the destruction of her father should be upset by some unforeseen event. I must increase the number of warriors that I am sending to the lonely pool. They must be six to one."

"Yes," answered the High Priest. "An ambush that is laid with insufficient forces is only a trap laid against oneself. But if thou would'st watch the dances that are being

## In the Rock Temple

practised, come with me, and thou shalt see the great wild reel of death that is just beginning. I hear already its roar of horror. It rises from the crypts like the vague boom of a distant whirlpool."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE DUNGEON

ROSITA lay in one of the rock-hewn dungeons, deep below the great many-pillared halls of the Temple of Destruction. How dark it was, she thought, how cold! Surely they might have given her a little light. And yet, what did it matter? Could a soul not grope its way to Heaven in the dark? Perhaps God saw us better in the blackness, even as we see fire-flies. She was free to think. The agony was over, and she was ready. The martyrdom of the spirit was gone through; there awaited her but the martyrdom of the flesh. But oh, how keen had been the struggle! She wondered

## The Dungeon

whether her hair had turned white in the last three days. She hoped to God that it had. She would fain go to Heaven with the badge of holy Age, pure and snowy, on her brow; not in the livery of hateful Youth. Since she must die before the coming of the wrinkles, at least let her die white-headed. She felt as calm as the most peaceful and contented eld that ever died at ninety; and she could have smiled if only she could have known that he was safe in Heaven, and waiting for her there. Ah, if she but knew that he was out of reach of Indian torture! For, if he was not dead, then surely they held him, and she would never know. How nearly he had succeeded in rescuing her. . . . Why, in that horrible struggle round the litter, there had been a moment when he had grasped her wrist, just as Othoxa's knife struck him. But, O God, God! let her not think of it! it shook her courage, and she was bound to die with decent strength. She must not flinch under that great, black

## The Romance of the Fountain

vault that held her as in the concave hand of Fate. This was the identical temple of her dream—the temple of the soul-crushing columns, hewn in the living rock. She knew each step she had to take. She knew the hideous end. And now the quicker she died the better. How rosy the summits of old age appeared from this dark gorge of young and violent death! She had thought to climb them hand in hand, she and he; and, sitting in the sunset, to look upon the plain of life stretched out beneath them, and on the path which they had slowly climbed. But it was not to be.

Strange! There came to her in the impenetrable darkness of the dungeon—was it fancy born of her thoughts?—something like a faint and distant echo of his voice. Perhaps he was calling her from the other world. She strained her ear to listen. "O love, I come," she murmured.

Then, through the darkness, muffled and

## The Dungeon

faint in the distance, there came to her the words, "To drink."

"O God!" she cried, "his earthly voice—O God! uphold me!" for she was staggering.

But she braced herself against her faintness, and began to grope her way towards the voice. Then she caught the sound of difficult breathing, and, groping on, laid her hand on an unseen face; unseen, but known only too well.

"Each time I speak," he whispered, "it makes the blood well up. The wound is through the lung——"

"O God!" she thought, "uphold me, uphold me! It is I; it is Rosita!" she said aloud.

"Is this Hell," he said, "and are you come from Heaven?"

"No," she answered, crouching beside him, and laying his head with infinite care in her lap; "this place is neither earth nor Hell, but Heaven's lobby. Nor am I come from Heaven, though we are going there. The door of death

## The Romance of the Fountain

is about to open, and has still to be passed through. I cannot see you. Oh for a little light to see his face once more—I wonder, is this great pain or boundless joy?"

"There is a jug of water near me. I have not the strength to lift it," he murmured.

She groped for it, and put it to his lips. "It is almost full," she said.

"This is the Draught of Youth," he whispered; "for those who drink of it never reach old age."

"And I am come to share it," she answered. "Is this draught the sweetest or the bitterest I have ever quaffed?" she thought. "But whether it be bitter or sweet," she added, "better this brackish water in common here, on the boundary of the land of shadows, than that great lonely draught for which he is thirsting."

Juan tried to raise himself on his elbow; tried to struggle up.

"If he were not your father, I would curse



## The Dungeon

him from the deepest abysses of my soul," he said, "for having brought you here."

"Oh, don't curse him," she cried. "Don't curse what I love, here on death's brink. He knows not what he does."

"O love, love, if only you had let me save you when all was ready planned," Juan said.

"It might not be," she answered.

"My God! to think that we might now be half across the ocean," he went on, "with the helm turned full on life.—It is too horrible. And if Hell holds——"

"Hush, hush!" she implored, "you mustn't speak, or you'll burst your wound afresh. A little more of this existence, or a little less; it will all be one in a few fleeting years. It would have been passing sweet, no doubt, to tread the path of life together hand in hand. I think I should have made you a good wife. I would have tried to be the sunshine of your house—the soother of your cares, your good adviser, the wise mother and trainer of your

## The Romance of the Fountain

children; the thrifty dispenser of your growing fortune, until you and I, at last grown old together, would have sat by the fire in life's long winter evenings talking of old, sweet memories. Or else, to the gentle humming of my wheel, with all the little grandchildren gathered round us, close to the crackling logs and the leaping shadows, I should have let the twilight creep and deepen about us, and told them fairy tales as I spun. Shall I tell you one now? Let me see: what shall I tell you? Shall I tell you of the little maiden who, once on a time, wove herself a dress of sunbeams? And how the wicked envious fairies came and stole it away in the night? And how, as she was standing in the high rippling corn telling her sorrows to the friendly little field-mouse, a fairy prince came by and saw her, and gave her a kiss, and how he came day after day, and at last carried her away in a fairy coach?"

"I think we are standing in the corn," he murmured. "It rises to your shoulder. . . .

## The Dungeon

It is sunset. . . . The grain stretches away in miles of gold. . . . And every now and then a great, slow wave of it rolls past us as the evening breeze rises. . . . The air is full of heat and ripeness. . . . A million insects are chirping round about us. . . . At intervals there comes from a distance a gust of reapers' song. The fairy coach has come too soon. . . . Something is breaking in my bosom. . . . Put your lips to mine, that my soul may kiss them as it flies away. . . ."

Then there was silence; silence that was broken only at long intervals by a solitary sob. She crouched over his body, passing her hands over it, and feeling the warmth die out of it quickly or slowly—she did not know. She had thought that she was in the dark; and now it seemed as if the light had been suddenly snuffed out. Was there a dark that was darkness to darkness? A dark compared with which the darkness of night was what sunlight is to night herself? His hand was

## The Romance of the Fountain

as heavy as a hand of clay. He did not answer, nor move, nor moan, nor breathe. She heard but her own breathing. He was dead. What! leave his love behind him in the darkness? Brush rudely past her through the narrow gate of Heaven? Oh, if only for this once, he was unmannerly, and she would scold him in the wide fields above. Was she a little mad? . . . There was a maiden who wove herself a garment of the sunbeams; and when they stole it, she went and told her sorrows to the nibbling field-mice in the tall ripe corn. Here, in this dungeon, there were only nibbling rats. Let them come forth to mourn with her a little as she sat by the dead. O love, love! if only she had the poppies and the wild flowers that twine about the wheat, there in the auburn fields where his lips had first touched hers; or woodland bells fresh from the sweet dewy mosses to lay upon his body, now that he was dead! . . . Nothing; nothing! But she could still sing

## The Dungeon

him the summer song he had loved. She would make the bright green hazels wave above him still.

"The wild bee is humming;  
The woodpecker drumming;  
My sweetheart is coming  
Through summer to me;

The nutters are nutting  
Till summer day's shutting;  
And now he is cutting  
My name on a tree.

The wood-dove is cooing  
And billing and wooing;  
And now we are doing  
As doeth the dove;

The squirrels are clinging  
Where hazels are swinging,  
And all of us singing  
And playing at love."

Ah! there was no light here in these crypts;  
no sunshine, no mercy, no hope. And if they  
buried him where he had died, no breeze  
would ever whisper to him in his loneliness.

## The Romance of the Fountain

When once they had taken her away, silence and darkness would have him for ever.

But, lo! a brightness was stealing upon her soul. Was it light or music, or both? Was there a dawn, she thought, that can shine through solid stone, and set at naught temple walls like these? Who was lifting those crushing vaults from above her, to let her see the sunrise? Overhead was a great sea of amber, of rose, of gold, where angel faces as numberless as bubbles, appeared and disappeared again so quickly that the eye could scarce watch them amid the reefs of glowing jacinth and the isles of beryl that shifted and changed with every passing minute in a dazzling corruscation. Was it the sea that they had once dreamt to live in for evermore, as merman and mermaid, far from earthly sorrows?

From the amber of the sunrise a chorus of Dawn Spirits were calling her to come where earth's heartache and sobs had no place;

## The Dungeon

where the soul struggled no longer like a bird shaking its cage; where life's song had died away, and youth and eld were now one; where the old counted not their winters, and the young would not grow old.

Then the angel voices died away. The amber of the great seas of glory overhead died back into the dungeon's darkness. But her soul was now strong and peaceful. The darkness was no longer as of iron, but seemed rather to hold her like the warm ripe gloom of summer woods at night. As she knelt, and held his heavy clay hand in hers, she could almost fancy him asleep, not dead, and his head resting softly on some sweet and mossy forest pillow. She scarcely dared to breathe lest she should wake him. What trees were spreading above them? What flowers were scattered round them, waiting for the light to open their bells? What fairies were circling round them on the grass to charm his sleep? And he was dead, quite dead. Nevermore would he and she sit listen-

## The Romance of the Fountain

ing in the forest. Dead, dead ; quite dead ; for ever, ever more. And she was waiting to be fetched for death herself. Hark, hark ! they were coming. She heard a tramp of feet echoing through the crypts. They were coming to fetch her, and she was ready.

A red glare leapt upon the arches of the vault, as the Master of the Sacrifices entered, accompanied by many priests and other Indians bearing torches and leather thongs.

"Are both her wrists well fastened, and are we ready?" he said, presently.

"Where are the thongs to fasten my soul?" she thought.

"I hear the Gong of Gongs beginning to boom," the Master said to his priests. "Form in order of procession, that we may gather, as we go along, all the hundred affluents of our human stream, till it rolls in waves of men like a great river that rolls to the ocean."

"Death's sea of gold is expanding at my feet," murmured Rosita.



## The Dungeon

And then, as the great procession wound along, there rose a dull, slow chant of "Lo, the Victim! We bring her to the Goddess, to the Destroyer. We bring her to the murderous Beauty, to the Flower of Cruelty, to the wondrous Executioner of Nature."

## CHAPTER XXVII

BY THE MAGIC BRINK.

MEANWHILE Don Luis was on his way to the Fountain.

After twelve or thirteen days' continuous marching, the dumb guide who led him and his small escort through the great forests at last stopped unexpectedly, and pointed to a gleam of water through the trees.

A trembling came over the pale, mystic-eyed Dreamer, and the heart in his breast beat to bursting. If only joy did not end his life before he had time to drain the draught, and cheat him of his conquest, he thought; for he knew that the goal was now reached, and what that water meant.

## By the Magic Brink

"Good Carpaza," he said to the lieutenant of the escort, "I pray thee, let the soldiers and the dumb guide wait for me here, under these mighty branches and within call. I would fain reach the margin of the Fountain alone, and not be watched."

And so he walked on alone towards the magic brink, rather controlling than hurrying his steps. He felt it due to the solemnity of the great act he was about to perform to be sober in this mighty moment; and in the last supreme and awful minutes that Age and he kept company, to choose the pace that Age should keep.

What giant trees! Every one of them seemed to be centuries old. Strange, he thought, if this forest should be the Wood of Ancients after all? If each of these grim trees had once been a man in whose breast the belief in Youth had died, then truly had they been Titans. O Youth, Youth! it was not *he* whose feet would turn into roots, whose arms would turn into boughs, for want of faith in the

## The Romance of the Fountain

Rosy Power. "But, O my heart," he cried, "thump not so fiercely in my chest, or all will end too soon."

How lone it was, how silent under the trees! It almost struck one with a chill, though the air was hot. It was as he had expected; no signs or shapes of magic surrounded the Fount. It looked mere natural water, like any other solitary fountain of the forest. No guarding dragons circled all round about it, with golden scales ceaselessly clashing. No evil angels sat on its margin to mirror their dusky pinions in its wave. Nothing was there but the infinite loneliness and loveliness of Nature.

And now he was standing on its very brink—on the brink of Youth. And again he called on his heart not to burst its dwelling in its great emotion; but let the beauty and the silence soothe it till he could drain the draught with a steady hand.

A single ray of sunlight struck down through

## By the Magic Brink

the branches to the clear recesses of the pool. How infinitely limpid was the water before him. It seemed like an Indian emerald melted. Down in the depths yellow spots were quivering. Those must surely be the pebbles of pure gold. There were lilies floating on the surface. No doubt they were immortal; for how could Death float upon the Fount of Youth?—Yes, he was actually standing by the Fount of Founts, by the brightness of the Gem of Gems; on the spot that he had seen in dreams by day and night through the long years of yearning. At last he could throw the image of his face on the mirror of Eternal Youth. And he was in time; he was in time. . . . Now he would kneel, and cast one long, long, lingering look of final farewell on his whitening hair and whitening beard before he lifted the golden cup on high in one ineffable libation.

But he suddenly drew back. Ha! what was that? What trick was the water playing?

## The Romance of the Fountain

Strange, very strange; though, of course, it was mere fancy. Down at the bottom, in the crystal depths, as his eye was sounding the brightness of the trembling water, he had thought he saw a skeleton. Of course, it was his fancy. His senses were overheated with excitement, and saw a nightmare even in the Fount of Youth. And yet the glimpse of horror had been strangely vivid. Now he could see nothing but the golden pebbles that paved the bottom of the pool, like the golden dreams under a sleeper's smile. Oh, there was nothing but splendour in those depths, light and glory and radiance and rapture and joy. There was nothing but triumph and life and boundless exultation; nothing but the dazzling gifts that a rapid hour could heap at once on one delighted head. Horror dwelt not in the shrine of Youth.

He took a golden cup from his bosom; filled it from the pool, and held it up. His face was transfigured; rapture flooded his

## By the Magic Brink

features, making them twenty years younger, though his lips had not touched the draught.

“Youth, Son of the Dawn Cloud,” he cried, “thou meteor-footed Spirit; thou with the diamond eyes, through whom all Nature lives and breathes and enjoys; for whom all life was kindled; apart from whom there is nothing but wreck and rubbish, but impotence, regret, and lonely care; thou that art lord of every sense and every power; thou for whose sole enchantment the whiteness and the witchery of woman, her kisses and her cajolery, were made; thou for whose joyous thirst the vintage of Sicily and Cyprus pours its streams of running ruby, of trickling topaz; for whose delight the lightning-sандаled dances leap and fly and circle, and the soaring songs pierce Midnight’s vault; thou for whom the fiery battle-steed waits—yea, and every straining hound, every pouncing falcon—oh make me young!

“If I have sought thee with the burning fire

## The Romance of the Fountain

of unspeakable love ; if I have given thee the numberless dreams, the thoughts, the terrors, the pantings of a lifetime ; the sleep of night, the repose of day ; if I have wasted all my natural youth in seeking thine that never dies ; if I have reached thee over unsounded seas, over undiscovered lands, by the same force that makes the moth flutter round the flame, grant me my prayer. Snatch from my forehead the wrinkled mask of Age ; send through my veins thy immense wave of life, and let me be transformed by thy radiance, now that I stand by thy limpid shrine and drink thy health in thy own clear emerald, divine and dazzling Spirit ! ”

Again he raised the cup, and was about to put it to his lips, when a shower of arrows from invisible hands struck the grass and the water all around him. One of the arrows lodged in his hip. He staggered and fell. The golden cup dropped from his hand and rolled into the pool.



## By the Magic Brink

"O my God!" he cried. "Treachery! Treachery! Help! Help!"

The soldiers of his escort ran up at his cries. Two of them laid him on the grass a few paces from the brink, and, while the others engaged the Indians, endeavoured to extract the arrow.

"O God! O God! what intolerable pain," he murmured hoarsely. "The fire of Hell is in my hip. . . ."

And he fainted.

"It's an ugly wound; but it's not mortal," one of the soldiers said presently, "unless the arrow is poisoned."

"If it is," answered the other, "take care not to cut thyself with it."

And they continued their efforts to extract it. It was a difficult task, and took some time. At last they got it out. The flow of blood that ensued partially restored the wounded man to consciousness. He opened his eyes, and looked at the men who were kneeling beside him. But

## The Romance of the Fountain

he did not see them. If he saw anything, it was an inner vision.

"There is Death at the bottom of the Fount," he muttered. "Death, deep under the water-lilies."

Suddenly his eye caught the gleam of the pool. Intelligence leaped back into his face.

"The water! The water!" he cried wildly. "I had not drunk. I tell you I had not drunk."

He stretched his hands towards it, and tried to struggle to his feet; but fell heavily back upon the grass.

"Will no one bring me a little of the water?" he implored. "One drop, only one drop, one tiny drop. . . . O my God! if only I could keep my feet."

The appeal of a lifetime was in his voice; the master passion of a soul was pleading in his eyes.

The sound of the fighting had moved far

## By the Magic Brink

away from the pool. All was solitary and peaceful around them.

"A little of the water! A little of the water!" he repeated.

One of the men went down to the margin, filled his steel cap with the sparkling liquid; brought it, bucket-fashion, by the leather strap, and held it to the wounded man's mouth.

"At last! At last!" the Dreamer panted, between the long draughts that he took. . . .

"I thank Thee, O my God."

He shut his eyes for a moment. The soldier who was supporting his head whispered something to his companion, and, with a meaning look, pointed to the wound. A bluish-green circle was forming round about it.

"Ah!" whispered the other, "that decides it. It's the same poison that killed Pedrillo and Gomez. It causes a wonderful excitement. Then you suddenly feel sleepy and die."

## The Romance of the Fountain

"I feel the ineffable bounding through my veins," Don Luis murmured. "It has swept away the pain. I feel nothing but delight. It is a delicious, indescribable sensation. What rapture! I see the infinite future spreading like a golden plain before me. It is Youth! It is Youth! It is Life, with all its boundless possibilities of joy; its measureless chances of triumph! Look at my hands! They are growing white and round; the creases upon them are disappearing. . . . I am being transformed, transfigured. . . ."

He tried to find something in his bosom, but his rapidly-swelling fingers were unequal to the task.

"Good fellow, thou wilt find a phial in my doublet," he said faintly. "Fill it from the Fountain. It is for my daughter, for my daughter Rosita. You all know how beautiful she is. Now her beauty will be safe from time, safe from time for ever. And, good fellow, drink thyself. . . . Men will say some

## By the Magic Brink

day that thou didst share Don Luis de Medrana's first draught. . . ."

The sky was beginning to glow with the sunset. The huge old tree-trunks that surrounded the pool stood out black and sharp against the background of gold. Above them innumerable cloudlets, like the down of angels' wings, formed a great shoal of glory, while the pool itself suddenly caught the glow and flamed up like a tarn of crimson.

"The sunrise," he murmured, "the sunrise of the new transcendent life. . . . The golden gates of the world of Youth. . . . How infinitely buoyant I feel. . . . How the springs of life seem to ripple within me. . . ."

He paused, and remained silent for some moments. When he spoke again, his tone had changed.

"The light is too dazzling . . ." he said feebly. "It exhausts me. . . . My eyes cannot bear the splendour. . . . I am still too weak from the wound. . . . It has all

## The Romance of the Fountain

been too sudden, too overwhelming. . . . I am growing drowsy. . . . I think I could sleep. . . .”

And with a rapturous smile of infinite sweetness and peace he closed his eyes for ever on the world of Youth and Age. Then the sun, rolling over the brink of the horizon on its inexorable way, left the wan twilight to deepen slowly on the undying and ever-renovated forest.

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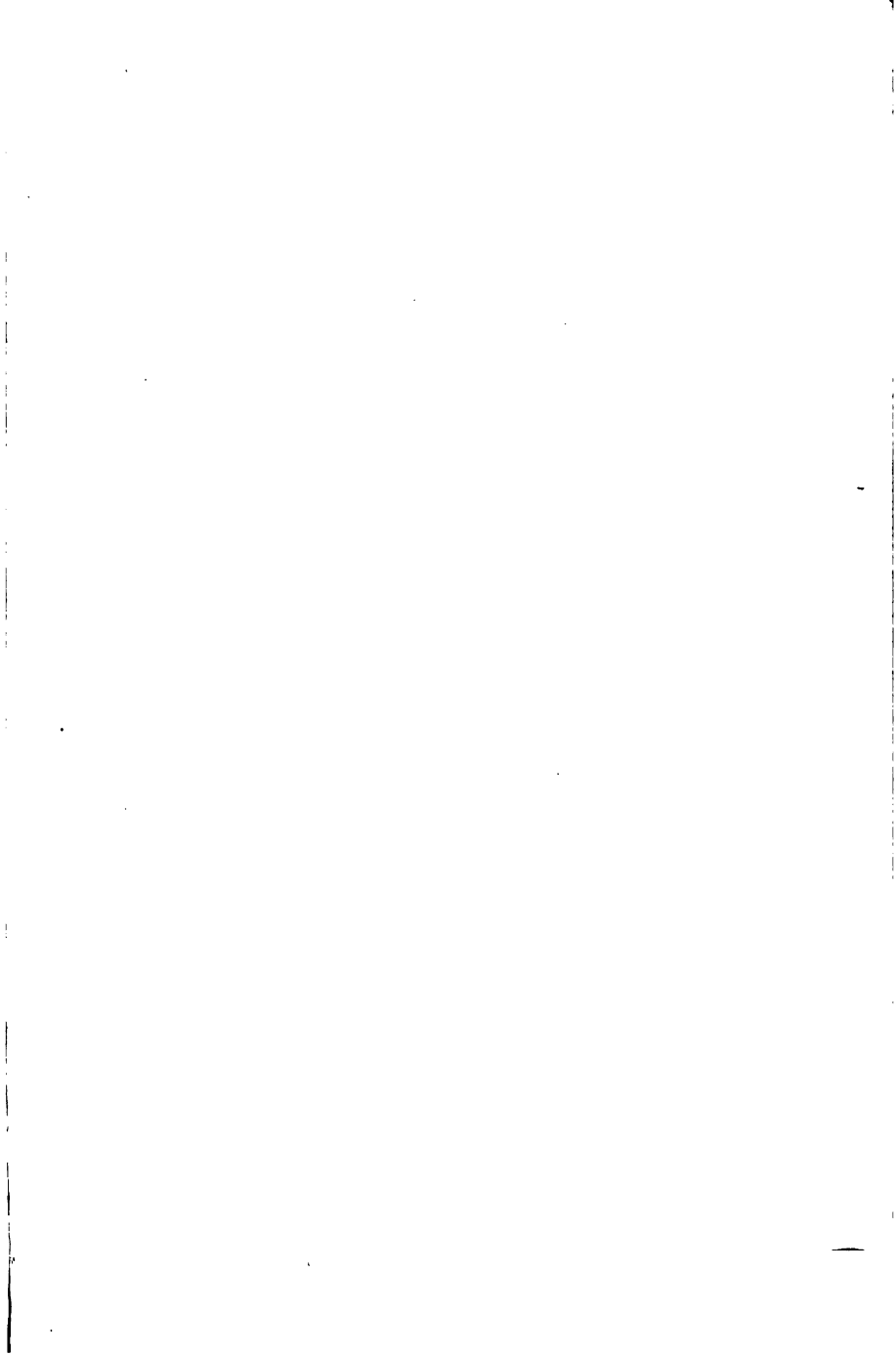
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